

The Stage is all the World,
and the Players are mere Men and Women
Performance Poetry in Postcolonial Paris

Cicilie Fagerlid

Dissertation submitted for the partial fulfilment of the Ph.D. degree,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo, January 2012

© Cicilie Fagerlid, 2012

*Series of dissertations submitted to the
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo
No. 340*

ISSN 1504-3991

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission.

Cover: Inger Sandved Anfinssen.
Printed in Norway: AIT Oslo AS.

Produced in co-operation with Unipub, Oslo.
The thesis is produced by Unipub merely in connection with the
thesis defence. Kindly direct all inquiries regarding the thesis to the copyright
holder or the unit which grants the doctorate.

Acknowledgements

From the very beginning, this research project has taken place in a strange zone between life and death, regeneration and destruction. It has been carried out in warm memory of Anita Jarl and her little son Julian whose sudden death, less than a week before I took up the long awaited and long wished for PhD position, brought a sadness into my life that I had not yet known, and in memory of Professor Eduardo Archetti who fell seriously ill at the same time. The exuberant guardian father at the Department of Social Anthropology in Oslo was meant to be my supervisor. I am forever grateful for the advice that he found time to give me, and even more for having the opportunity to experience – the last years of his career and the first years of mine – the personal and professional warmth that he radiated. I am also grateful for the brief encounters and supervision I had the chance to receive from my second supervisor, Marianne Gullestad, before she passed away.

The project started under the inauspicious spell of the strangeness of the world revealed by death and the illness of my dearest father who has laid the foundation for all I am and all I know. Slowly, slowly, however, the project transformed back into a world in which I could dwell again, much thanks to the genuine openness of chance encounters and the remarkably generous integrating forces of the Parisian slam milieu. I would particularly express my gratitude to “Laurent” and Karim. Emerging from the darkest time of my life, I was met with warm tolerance and was guided through wonders in the City of Lights. Always there for me, through thick and thin, through one fieldwork, longer than the other and beyond the birth of our son – the light of my life, Leo – is my husband, Inge. Thank you! Thank you also to the generous, open-minded and encouraging director of the research programme that funded my project, Professor Thomas Hylland Eriksen. If you must have a boss, always opt for an anarchist. Thank you to Lorenz Khazaleh for innumerable chats on Skype during lonely nights of fieldwork, and to fellow PhD students Sharam Alghasi, Bengt Andersen, Espen Marius

Foss, Anne Hege Grung, Aina Landsverk Hagen, Cecilie Nordfeldt, Tone Sommerfelt, Christian Sørhaug and Nerina Weiss for encouragement, comments and community.

Thank you also to my last supervisor, Professor Marit Melhuus, who taught me perseverance and precision (hopefully). There is no doubt that her active pen and pertinent and impertinent questions played a major role in concluding the long and winding writing process. Finally, it felt like arriving at a safe harbour when Michelle Tisdell took charge of the copyediting.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
CONTENTS	4
CHAPTER 1 – THEMATIC INTRODUCTION	9
“...POETICALLY MAN DWELLS...”: WHAT IS PARISIAN SLAM AND WHICH POLITICAL, SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS DOES IT ANSWER?	9
THE STAGE IS ALL THE WORLD, AND THE PLAYERS ARE MERE MEN AND WOMEN: WHAT IS PARISIAN SLAM?	9
THE OPENNESS OF SLAM	11
THE VARIETY OF SLAM	13
WHICH POLITICAL, SOCIO-GEOGRAPHICAL AND EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS DO PARISIAN SLAM ADDRESS?	18
THE TENNIS COURT OATH: THE COSMOGONIC RETURN TO THE EARLY DAYS OF THE REVOLUTION	18
THE BARE HUMAN, RELATIONAL ART, THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY	19
Slamiteration, by Amaranta	19
A LIFE IN THE OPEN – THE PRESENCING NATURE OF POETRY	24
Between the walls, by Abd el Haq	25
The orphans, by Antoine Faure (Tô)	28
CHAPTER 2 – ETHNOGRAPHIC INTRODUCTION	33
HOW I DISCOVERED SLAM AS THE PERFECT FIELD SITE FOR STUDYING THE STATE OF AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC TODAY	33
THE ARCHI-TEXTURE OF LINES OF EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION – RAGE AND POETRY	33
THE CHANCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF BEGINNING A FIELDWORK ON SOCIAL COHESION AND SENSES OF BELONGING IN FRANCE IN OCTOBER 2005	34
MEETING LAURENT AND JEAN IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ANTI-CPE EVENTS	36
NINE HOURS OF FIELDWORK AND HOW I DISCOVERED SLAM POETRY ON A TRIP TO THE SUBURBS AND BACK AGAIN	38
A LIFE IN THE OPEN VERSUS A CONTAINED LIFE – PARIS AND THE SUBURBS	39
LA MILONGA	41
THE BUS TRIP TO <i>NOUVELLE FRANCE</i>	45
PLEX Y GLASS, RUE OBERKAMPF, PARIS EAST	47
THE WINDING STREETS OF BELLEVILLE AND MÉNILMONTANT	49
ARABIC IN THE STREETS OF PARIS	51
CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION	54
INTRODUCTION	54

TRUTH, THE REAL WORLD AND VALIDITY, OBJECTIVITY AND GENERALISATION.....	55
TRUTHFULNESS OF DEPICTION.....	56
A NOTE ON THE USE OF VIDEO	63
TRANSCENDENCE OF PERSPECTIVES	66
ROLE-INVOLVEMENT IN THE FIELD AND ETHNOGRAPHER’S PATH	66
THE PARTICULAR AND SPECIFIC EMBODIMENT AND THE DARKER ARTS OF FIELDWORK.....	70
THE VISTA OF EXISTENTIAL SUFFERING	73
ETHICS	74
ASPIRATION TO PRODUCE INSIGHTS THAT CAN BE APPLIED ELSEWHERE.....	75
FROM EXPERIENCE NEAR TO EXPERIENCE DISTANT CONCEPTS IN COEVAL TIMES.....	75
CHAPTER 4 - THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION	79
SLAM: PERSONHOOD, BELONGING AND COMMUNITY SPANNING THE COLONIAL GAP	79
THE COLONIAL GAP: THE MUZZLED ONES AND FULL HUMAN BEINGS	80
BODIES OF EXCEPTION	83
THE CIVILISATION DEFICIT, THE SUBURBS AND THE <i>JEUNES DE BANLIEUES</i>	84
Banlieue and jeune de banlieue: stereotypes, subalterns and “sheep”	85
Civilisation deficit, victimisation and stereotyping.....	87
THE TIME OF THE REVOLTS, AND FAITH AND FORCE IN SPEECH.....	89
LA FRANCE MÉTISSÉE AND THE BECOMING AND HETEROGENEITY OF SLAM.....	90
WEAVING THE TEXTURES OF LIFE AND WORLD.....	91
THE DISSOLVING SPACE OF AGGREGATED DISTINCTIONS	92
AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF HETEROGENEITY AND BECOMING	94
THE FLUIDITY OF SLAM SPACE.....	97
THERAPY IN THE TRUTH OF POETRY	102
ENTERING INTO THE VERY GROUND OF BEING THROUGH THE TECHNE AND POIESIS IN	
POETRY AND THE AUTOPOIETIC POTENTIAL IN PERFORMANCES	105
THE CHAPTERS	107
CHAPTER 5 – THE BIOPOLITICAL SPACE OF THE CITY	110
SOCIO-POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF NORTH-EAST PARIS	110
BELLEVILLE FROM THE OUTSIDE.....	110
THEME OF CHAPTER.....	111
EXPLORING BY LEG-WORK – BELLEVILLE FROM THE INSIDE.....	112
BELLEVILLE AS MESHWORK	116
IMMIGRATION	116
<i>BOBOS</i> , GENTRIFICATION IN BELLEVILLE AND SLAM	118
MOSAIC OR MESHWORK? UNBOUNDEDNESS AND FLUIDITY	121
BIOPOLITICS, THE CITY AND DEMOCRACY.....	124
BELLEVILLE MULTITUDE.....	129
CITY DIVIDED AFTER HAUSSMANN: NORTHEAST AS POPULAR AND LEFTWING	129
PRODUCTION OF LOCALITY AND PARTICIPANT IDENTITIES	131
RE-APPROPRIATION OF SPACE	137
THE ORDERED REPUBLICAN SPACE OF PARIS	137
RESEAU EDUCATION SANS FRONTIERS AND THE SANS-PAPIERS	140
Sarkozy has forgotten that his parents are foreigners (by 9eme Collectif des sans-papiers)	143
THE BATTLE OVER SPACE: PLACE NAMES	144
SUMMING UP	147

CHAPTER 6 – “WE CAN MIX ANYTHING, WE DON’T GIVE A FUCK” 149

**THE FLUID SPACE OF A SLAM SESSION AS IT FLOWS AND FOLDS AND
“DECOMPARTMENTALISES” ENVIRONMENT, LIFE AND EXPERIENCE 149**

SOLVENT VARIABLES IN FLUID SPACE	150
WHY THIS SESSION WITH DGIZ AT L’ATELIER DU PLATEAU?	152
THE MATERIALITY OF PLACES: L’ATELIER DU PLATEAU, XANGO BAR, LOU PASCALOU AND THE SUBURBAN SLAM CARAVANE:	153
THE THEATRE L’ATELIER DU PLATEAU,	153
... XANGO BAR,	155
... AND CAFÉ LOU PASCALOU	157
AND THE SUBURBAN SLAM CARAVANE, NOMADIC BETWEEN CULTURAL CENTRES	160
SUMMING UP STATISTICAL FEATURES FROM THE FOUR VENUES.	163
PART 2: WEDNESDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2007 AT L’ATELIER DU PLATEAU	166
<i>MASTER DGIZ, THE ARTIST AND WIZARD OF SOCIAL RELATIONS</i>	166
Balancing diversity: of style, age and gender.....	169
“Décroissance” – ideas of “degrowth” in slam	170
The inclusion of <i>les exclus</i>	171
Quick interludes.....	172
“The revolt of the royalists”	173
“Brakeless Orpheus” – a lesson in lyricism	174
Contrasts in a row	175
Humans and machines – slam and mechanical society	177
PAUSE	178
“Individualist society”	178
Maurice Papon and the re-appropriation of French history	181
“It’s the life of the texts; we must leave them alone”	181
All the restrained cries in the name of a correct life	183
Russian, and human suffering	184
Something completely different	185
On commercialism again	185
Children’s songs and the classical tradition of French rap – and the ego and talent of a good MC	186
“I’m not normal. Like you”	187
Men and women	188
Grand Corps Malade clone	189
Towards the end	189
Improvisation	189
SUMMING UP THE SESSION: CONTRASTS AND FLUID DYNAMICS.....	193

CHAPTER 7 195

THE ART OF BARE NECESSITY: POETRY AND THERAPY 195

LIFE’S HARD, LIFE’S NOT EASY... (BY CHANTAL CARBON)	195
OUTLINE OF CHAPTER.....	198
LA POÉSIE, UN ART DE PREMIÈRE NÉCESSITÉ – POETRY, AN ART OF BARE NECESSITY (NADA)	199
NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS AND THE SLAM PHENOMENON	208
DGIZHORS (DGIZ OUTSIDE) – BUILDING THE NEW DGIZ.....	212
DGIZ INSIDE – GENERATION PRISON	213
FROM DGIZHORS TO DGIZ INTRA MUROS – FROM THE BANLIEUES TO PARIS	220
THE THERAPEUTIC SPACE OF SLAM: SLAM AS SHARING OF SUFFERING	222

(TATA MILOUDA AND) NATACHA	223
“TRAFFICKING IN STIGMAS”, AND DIGNITY	224
TEXTS AND THERAPY	226
WITNESSING SUFFERING IN THE RECEPTIVENESS OF ANTIPHONY	230
CHAPTER 8 - LES MOTS SONT DES VÊTEMENTS DE L'ÉMOTION	233
HOW SLAM ANIMATE AT THE DEEPEST LEVEL WITH THE HELP OF EMOTIONS, WORDS AND POIESIS	233
INTRODUCTION: SLAM – THE SHARING OF MOVING MOMENTS.....	233
PROBLEMATICS REFINED: SLAM – THE FULLEST POSSIBLE RELATION	234
AESTHESIS AS THE EXTENSION OF THE SENSES	235
OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTER.....	237
PART ONE: SLAM – RITUAL IN ITS OWN RIGHT	237
PHANTASMOGORIA, TECHNE AND POIESIS IN VIRTUALITY	242
PART TWO: COMMUNICATION AND EMOTIONS – THE MULTISENSORY POIESIS OR WIZARDRY OF SLAM	247
FROM WORDS AS CLOTHES FOR FEELINGS TO MOMENTS OF HUMANITY	247
MOMENT OF HUMANITY (BY SOULEYMANE DIAMANKA)	248
THE POETS HIDE TO WRITE (BY SOULEYMANE DIAMANKA)	250
WORDS AND SOCIAL WIZARDRY	254
THE FOCUSING OF LANGUAGE, AND SPEECH AS THE PERSON’S ACOUSTIC SIGNATURE	257
PART THREE: TECHNE AND POIESIS IN THE POETRY OF SLAM	263
A RELATION OF PLENITUDE, WITHOUT CODIFICATION	263
NO IDENTITY BUT HUMAN IDENTITY AND AN INTRINSIC DIMENSION.....	266
ART AS COLLECTIVE COMMUNION	269
ADVANCING TOWARDS A FREE THOUGHT, AND A LIBERATION FROM THE “TRUTH” OF POLITICS	271
SUMMING UP	276
CODA: THE SOUND OF POETRY	277
BRAKELESS ORPHEUS (ANTOINE FAURE – TÔ).....	280
CHAPTER 9 – RETURN TO THE REPUBLICAN COSMOGONY OF THE TENNIS COURT OATH	284
BELONGING, SOLIDARITY AND DIFFERENCE IN DEMOCRACY	284
THEME AND OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTER.....	284
SOCIAL DRAMA AND REPUBLICAN RITES: GRANDS PAYS MALADE – SLAM AND CRISIS.....	286
GRAND CORPS MALADE AND AN EXPRESSION OF REDRESS: SAINT DENIS.....	289
SLAM AS MACHINERY OF REDRESS: RIOTERS AND SLAMMERS REVERSE THE BODY OF EXCEPTION	293
FRENCH VERSUS US-AMERICAN POETRY PERFORMANCES – TWO DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHIES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION PLAYED OUT IN SLAM SPACE	297
INTERMEZZO IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: ROUSSEAU AND LOCKE ON SOCIETAL INTEGRATION	297
FRENCH AND US AMERICAN SLAM POETRY.....	300
PARISIAN SLAM AS THE FULLEST POSSIBLE RELATION (<i>PLENITUDE</i>): TRANSFORMATIONS, SOLIDARITY AND DEMOCRATIC ACCESSIBILITY	301
ART AND LIFE: SINCERITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN PERFORMANCE, PERSONHOOD AND IDENTITY	305
COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY	307
ART AS DIRECT DEMOCRACY	309
DISTINCTIONS AND FLUID SPACE – CLASS SOLIDARITY AND FLUID MODERNITY	313

SLAM AND CLASS: OPENNESS, SOLIDARITY AND STRUGGLE	313
DISSOLVING DISTINCTIONS IN THE COSMIC TIME OF EQUALITY	316
CHAPTER 10 – “I WRITE FRENCH IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE”	320
THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN AND DIFFERENCE	320
THEME AND OUTLINE OF CHAPTER	320
THE COSMOPOLITAN CANOPY OF PARISIAN SLAM POETRY	321
COMMUNICATION ACROSS DIFFERENCE	325
COMMUNICATION OF BELONGING, CONNECTIONS AND DIFFERENCE	327
MARIE-FRANÇOISE AND HOCINE BEN: DE-MUZZLING THE HISTORY OF FRANCE	329
WE STARTED TO RUN (BY MARIE-FRANÇOISE)	329
THE MUZZLE (BY HOCINE BEN)	334
UCOC: FRENCH AND THE COLONIAL DISEASE	337
SEVEN : TWO EIGHT, BY UCOC LAÏ	339
SOULEYMANE DIAMANKA AND THE DELEUZIAN “MINOR” LANGUAGE	342
FULANI WINTER, BY SOULEYMANE DIAMANKA	343
“I WRITE FRENCH IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE”: THE BECOMING UNIVERSAL OF DIFFERENCE	348
CHAPTER 11 OR EPILOGUE	352
FRANCE AND THE PEOPLE WITHOUT HISTORY	352
SOCIAL COHESION AND THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: <i>OUBLI</i> OR REMOVING THE “MUZZLE”	352
SHARING THE HISTORY	354
OUTLINE OF CHAPTER	356
THE STORY OF LOUIS	359
WHAT IS IN AN “ETHNICITY”?	364
SUBALTERN OR BECOMING MINORITARIAN?	365
POWER AND CATEGORISATION	367
<i>POLÉMIQUES</i> OVER FRENCH HISTORY 2005-06, AN OVERVIEW	369
INTEGRAL EUROPE VERSUS RELATIONAL EUROPE	373
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF INTEGRAL EUROPE	373
THE MORE CORRECT EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELATIONAL EUROPE	379
ENDNOTES: POEMS IN FRENCH	381
REFERENCES	401

Chapter 1 – Thematic Introduction

“...Poetically man dwells...”: What is Parisian slam and which political, socio-geographical and existential questions does it answer?

The stage is all the world, and the players are mere men and women:

What is Parisian slam?

This thesis is about the organisation of a space of equality and conviviality where people come in order to express themselves and to listen to others. In slam, as the title says, the stage is the entire world and all the players merely men and women. This is a paraphrase of a famous quote from William Shakespeare’s drama *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” Instead of seeing the world as a stage and life as a play, I suggest that the phenomenon of Parisian slam turns Shakespeare’s dictum on its head and brings real life up on stage. Moreover, in various ways slam blurs the boundary between performer and audience, bringing to a large degree the audience too up on stage. The audience in this case usually implies a little bit of “all the world”. Likewise, instead of saying as Shakespeare did, that men and women are just filling pre-set roles of pre-set stages of human existence, I suggest that Parisian slam poetry seeks to bring the life of the singular individual into the limelight and let each speak for himself or herself, in his or her own singular language. Thus, *The stage is all the world, and the players are mere men and women* is an attempt to write from postcolonial Paris, where a multitude of voices can be heard.

According to the really old-timers – those who started in the mid 1990s or earlier – “open stages” (*scènes ouvertes*) where anyone can come and perform their own texts were practiced in Paris long before the entrepreneur Pilote Le Hot in the late 1990s found

inspiration from the slam poetry phenomenon in the United States and decided to use the English term in Paris. Until about 2002-2003 the milieu was more or less unified, but since then Pilote and the association Slam Production strictly practice *slam de poésie* as a tournament of short performances and follow the rules¹ from the Chicago-based founder of slam poetry, Marc Smith. Although having been to several of Pilote's sessions, I received my big *claque* ("slap, or slam"²) at a non-competitive *scène ouverte* session hosted by MC Tsunami. It was love at first sight and an eye-opening experience, which I will recount in the second, ethnographical part of this introduction. Parisian slam thus consists of one competitive branch, and another loosely knit milieu where the large majority of sessions are non-competitive. Hereafter, when I generalise about Parisian slam poetry, I am referring to these non-competitive sessions.

The lack of competition (in a majority of sessions) is the most fundamental difference separating French *slam* from slam poetry in all other countries. This is also the reason why I have chosen the term "performance poetry" in the title, as everyone familiar with "slam", except the French, understand it as a competition in poetry performance. This absence of competition seems to be a catalyst for what I have found to be the most distinctive features of Parisian slam. The reason this peculiarity within the world of slam has come about exactly in France seems to reflect important aspects of wider French society. The non-competitiveness therefore forms part of what must be explained and contextualised, rather than being an explanation in itself.³ This thesis is therefore as much about French society as it is about French slam. However, instead of subsuming the richness of the slam scene just for an argument illustrating the state of affairs of *vivre*

¹ That it is a competition, foremost, with a jury consisting of five people (randomly) chosen from the audience. The performances last three minutes maximum, after 15 seconds overtime points are subtracted. No accessory and no music (which most other slam sessions follow as well) are the most important rules.

² The English word "slam" is apparently of Scandinavian, Old Norse origin, and it means to shut, strike or put in or on a particular place with force, shock and loud noise (source wiktionary: slam). Many French slammers are familiar with the French translation *claquer* – which has both the sense "slam or bang (e.g. the door)" and to hit someone – and use it to describe how slam can hit you hard. According to many, Pilote has tried to monopolise the meaning of "slam" as in a tennis tournament (*chelem*), to support his claim that it can only mean a competition. (See my blog posting http://www.anthropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2007/discussing_slam_poetry_on_tv_the_schism (accessed 4.09.2011) for further information. This post discusses the television debate between the four prominent slammers Pilote, D' de Kabal, Grand Corps Malade and Dgiz, where GCM ends up calling Pilote a fundamentalist because he does not accept that slam can have a new and different meaning in France (*Slam: du bistrot à la télé*, accessed 18.01.2012).

³ In Chapter 9, I compare French non-competitive slam with its sister phenomenon in the United States of America.

ensemble (societal cohesions) in the Republic, I rather aim to show how the practices and ideals of Republican France partly can explain the content of the sessions and how they play out.

The openness of slam

The non-competitive slam milieu can be described as a plethora of overlapping networks organised around persons and places. More precisely perhaps, like the fungal mycelium, as the anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests as a good metaphor or image (as an alternative for the Deleuzian rhizome), for a living organism “as an every-ramifying bundle of lines of growth” (Ingold 2008: 1807). (I am not suggesting that the slam milieu is a living organism writ large, but except from that, the metaphor sticks well.) The old-timer slammer and pianist Paul Cash (in his fifties) points to the openness of the “open stage” as the factor leading to what he calls the “snowball effect” of slam, an effect similar to Ingold’s description of the fungus mycelium. Paul Cash:

Slam is open to everybody, so it is a movement that is all the time growing, increasing, getting bigger. This thing is an incredible idea. I’ve always said that it’s a milieu that is open and closed at the same time. It’s closed in the sense that there are the old-timers (*les anciens*), but a new [performer] might become an old-timer very quickly. You, who interview for instance, [after a few months] you know everybody. You say texts on stage, you’re very well-known in the milieu, and you’re part of it. Consequently, it is a very open milieu. That’s what’s so funny about it. It’s an open mafia.

Another aspect of Ingold’s metaphor is the mycelium’s interwoven relationship with its environment. A fungus feeds itself through absorbing nutrients through the permeable membrane that surrounds it, but first the fungus must secrete enzymes into the food source breaking it down.⁴ This process resembles the relationship between a slam session and its environment, the local neighbourhood where it is situated. In other words, slam is always localised. Practitioners define slam as “a place” (*lieu*) or “a ground”

⁴ Source: English Wikipedia: Mycelium (accessed 4.09.2011).

(*terrain*) where “ephemeral moments or instances of encounters” can take place (see Chapter 8). A slam is the *scène ouverte* (“open stage”) as well as the individual slams that take place on this “stage”. It is not however recordings on an album or performances in a concert, even though slammers might perform the same texts at concerts as at *scènes ouvertes*, simply because slam per definition must be free and open for anyone who wants to take part. The slam phenomenon spreads its “enzymes” out in the environment and absorbs a wide range of different “nutrients”. Ingold defines “the environment” as a “zone of entanglement”, where “beings” – or in this case the organic phenomenon of the slam milieu – “grows or ‘issues forth’ along the lines of their relationships” (Ingold 2008: 1807). In Chapter 5, I will describe the northeastern neighbourhoods where Parisian slam originated and still flourishes, to delineate the “the lines of relationship” slam “issues forth” along.

Parisian slam is an opportunity open for anyone to perform short texts (only a handful of performers improvise), and it takes place in prearranged places: usually small cafés and bars, but also local theatres, community centres, museums, and out in the open. A slam session lasts for three-four hours, and is hosted or convened (*animé*) by one or several hosts (*animateur, -trice*). The role of the host before the session starts is to collect, on a list, the names of those who want to perform. During the session, the host calls up one at the time – often chronologically down the list of names, but sometimes in accordance with other principles (see Chapter 6) – and each performer has three to five minutes to perform his or her text. (Although I have never seen the time limit enforced, people usually remain brief). The host makes sure that everyone receives a sufficient amount of applause, before and after the performance, as well as silence during it. Performers and themes are extremely varied.

Another important ingredient of Parisian slam is the writing workshops, for youth, elders, people with various disabilities, homeless people, the mentally ill, battered women as well as “anyone interested” (and probably other categories as well, but these are the kinds of workshops I have visited). Established slammers host these workshops (but as Paul Cash pointed out, it often does not take long to become established). All or most who host sessions also host workshops. The workshops are usually paid for by the Parisian or suburban municipality, except when they take place in relation to a festival or

some other particular event of private initiative. Many slammers travel widely – in the near and far suburbs, the rest of France, as well as the rest of the *Francophonie* – to host workshops and sessions. At workshops, the participants train to express themselves in various ways: in writing, with voice, in moving, in performing, in using a microphone. The hosts seem to teach in their personal manner, according to what they see as important and what they are good at themselves.⁵ The workshops are both a welcome source of income for often relatively poor slammers and an integral part of the slam *ethos* (i.e. the ambience of ethical and political principles) proclaiming that everybody can – and almost *should* – slam.

The variety of slam

I will let the long-time very active host of sessions as well as workshops, MC Tsunami (in his late forties) describe what Parisian slam is. It is a description that most in this milieu can agree on:

Question: What is the phenomenon French slam, according to you?

Answer: Until now – and I hope that that will continue – you have a great variety (*grande variété*), great originality, a great opening (*grande ouverture*), a freshness, a dynamics [⁶...] In a slam session in a bar in [the North-East Parisian neighbourhoods of] Belleville or Ménilmontant, there are Arabs, Blacks, Indians, Americans, the whole world in the same bar. It's a wealth (*richesse*) of possibilities for encounters in the mix of communities (*mixité communautaire*). At the level of styles, texts, level of expression, there are loads of themes addressed (*abordées*). It's an originality and dynamism on

⁵ Cathrine Duval (K'trin D) an old-timer from Slam Production (the association of Pilote Le Hot) published a manual on holding workshops the year after my fieldwork ended. Johann Guyot-Baron (Yo), another truly old-timer whom I will introduce properly in Chapter 7, on slam as therapy, dismissed the initiative as an attempt to "institutionalise" something that apparently should be open and free for the hosts themselves to define.

⁶ He continues: "that doesn't exist in the United States anymore. They all do tournaments. To win a tournament one must do this and that." This point is not relevant here, but it is however in Chapter 9 where I compare the two slam phenomena, and where I will show that Tsunami, although exaggerating a bit, seems to be right in his suggestion that competition in the USA streamlines both who participates and what they slam about. *En passant*, throughout the thesis, I will use the term "US American", as I explicitly refer only to slam in the United States of America, not Canada and certainly not the rest of the Americas.

the French stages. [...] French slam has re-appropriated the founding ideas of slam and regenerated them.

Q: What are these founding ideas?

A: Total freedom of expression. It's not an elitist stage, it's a stage for sharing (*partage*), where everybody is on an equal footing, to put poetry in focus, not the individual.

The variety or diversity, and the openness are common features when people familiar with Partisan slam describe it. Many also use the words *rencontre*, “encounter” and “free speech”, *libre parole*. What does it mean to put poetry, not the individual in focus? I understand it to mean not to let your own person and ego overshadow the content of your performance. Similarly, the slammers Damien and Antoine (Tô) say that you do not go to slam sessions because of the fame of a particular slammer but to see if something will happen or not this particular night. This, you can never know in advance because of the fluidity and variation of the numerous variables, but with certain people and at certain places something special is more likely to take place. I will return to all the points Tsunami brings up – heterogeneity, openness, freedom of expression, sharing and equality – in subsequent chapters. The neighbourhoods of Belleville and Ménilmontant will be described in Chapter 5. Briefly, I can say that they are historically popular and rebellious, and highly cosmopolitan, as they have accommodated wave upon wave of immigrants for several centuries.

Q: What do you want to put across in the workshops?

A: That everybody can write; it's not very complicated. Everybody can get ideas out of their head and clarify them. Everybody can write and everybody can speak. That means they're not fantastic acts, they're acts that belong to everybody, and that are even in everybody's nature (*dans la nature de chacun*). To write a text and say it, you don't necessarily have to be very gifted, to be a star.

This democratic, popular aspect will become a recurrent theme as well.

To my question “why is it important to express oneself in front of others?” the essence of what Tsunami said is very much in line with a broadly shared view, he framed his answer a bit differently, though:

A: I read two books by Desmond Morris when I was about thirteen-fourteen, *The naked monkey* and *The human zoo*: When going from the village to the city, man went from a tribal condition to a hypertribal one, and in the hypertribal condition all relations are cut off. We know who this and that star is but not who is our neighbour. One of the principal driving forces [of slam], even before wanting to become a professional, before everything else, is that anybody can come and have the same right to speak as anybody else (*même droit de parole de n'importe qui*), and the same right to be listened to (*droit d'écoute*) as anybody else. And, at *Planete Slam* [Tsunami's organisation that hosts sessions and workshops] in any case, when I host (*anime*) I'm always extremely careful to make sure that the listening of the audience (*l'écoute*) should be guaranteed for everybody, a basic practice (*pratique de base*). Being able to express oneself (*pouvoir s'exprimer*) and being listened to (*d'être écouté*) by others: there one can say that it's the tribe of the poets that allows recreating a bond (*un lien*) [of “the tribal condition”], a listening, thus an individual existence.

To express oneself, to be listened to, and to listen to others are widespread descriptions of slam. Together with the notion of “sharing” (*partager*), I will claim they constitute the basic ethos of this “mycelium” thread of Parisian slam: Expressing oneself, sharing and listening. “The same right to speak and the same right to be listened to” seem fundamental in all hosts' understanding of their job. Unlike “diversity”, this democratic dynamic is not prevalent in all non-practicing slam-goers' description, perhaps because they have not experienced the forceful effect of it, which I will claim is therapeutic (in Chapter 7), and democratically emancipatory (in Chapter 9).

Bridging this section on what slam is with the next section on which questions slam answers, I give the word to two more insiders. They highlight two other important

features of the slam milieu: The heterogeneity of participants, and what Tsunami called “the dynamics”. First Dgiz (in his mid thirties, nickname derived from his surname Ghizellaoui, thus pronounced /ʒiz/) is another prominent old-timer. He reacted vehemently when I asked him if the slam milieu is a milieu of deviants and the marginalised (*marginiaux et déviants*):

No, it is varied (*éclectique*)! The slammers and what they do are from everywhere. Marie-Françoise and Nico K [a former elementary school teacher in her sixties and a well-dressed quite middle-class young man in his twenties] [...] All these individuals (*personnages*) haven’t been to the same school, don’t come from the same family, the same housing estate, or city (*cité*). Everyone brings their own identity, their own path (*parcours*). [...] That’s why I don’t define it [slam]. Because I’m aware that if one defines it, one confines/contains it (*l’enferme*). And if one contains it, *eh voilà*, like one has done with rap.⁷

There are bourgeois slammers, handicapped slammers, ex-convict slammers, alcoholic slammers and slammers on drugs, there are those who are “dry” [alcoholics/drug addicts]. There are slammers who are sporty, in love, and there are those who are “trash”. And every slammer and “slammeuse” gives with their path, their interpretation and their creation a place (*endroit*), a reference point (*repère*) in society. That’s what’s so strong in slam. Marginalised? No. [...] We’re here. We’re now in an era with means of communication. It’s not like before. That’s over. One can inform oneself, one can stay updated, and it’s going fast. We are the physical spokespersons, physical and alive, from the communities originating in our society.

Dgiz describes the milieu as extremely varied in terms of age, social and professional background, and particularly in terms of personal trajectories. In Chapter 9, I will

⁷ Dgiz probably means that rap has on the one hand stagnated artistically, on the other, that it has become enemy number one for the ruling party because of its association with the *banlieues*. In France, rap is highly controversial; it is involved in a politicised discourse mixing immigration and the suburbs with a loss of national identity as well as grandeur.

compare this description of slam as a milieu of *individuals* with their “paths, interpretations and creations” to US American slam where identity politics are much more prominent. Underlying Dgiz’ description, I find a strong democratic element, which – (I believe he is saying) unlike the elites of French society – does not include “only” people from the same school (*École Normale d’Administration*), or unlike nepotism and gangs in the banlieue, recruits a variety of members of society.

Johann Guyot-Baron (in his late thirties) is another long-standing practitioner who started on the open stages before the term slam came to France. I let the apt and encompassing description he gives of the unfolding, many-faceted character of a slam session lead up to the next part where I will explore which political, socio-geographical and existential questions Parisian slam addresses.

It is a movement that connects an artistic manifestation with a social current. That means that we have no educators, people who make preparations and do social work. Instead, the artistic outcome itself is this social product. We’re not awaiting an outcome, repetitions, and perfection in slam. And foremost, we try to break the boundary between the artist and the audience. The audience is the artist and vice versa. I use to say that we’re very close to “The tennis court oath”. We try to make sure that speech is shared: It’s a certain utopia of democracy.

In slam then, the production of art cannot be separated from the social and political issues manifested at a session – the variety, the equal sharing of speech, the solidarity. It is all a process; it is in the making. Johann also compares slam to a jam session, where everybody, or as many as possible, contributes to the process. The sociality of the slam session itself is the artistic outcome, and this social and artistic product is a revolutionary event and a democratic utopia. How does the phenomenon of slam achieve this? Johann then brings up this intriguing comparison to what is known as the *Tennis Court Oath*.

Which political, socio-geographical and existential questions do Parisian slam address?

The Tennis Court Oath: The cosmogonic return to the early days of the Revolution

From the beginning when I discovered slam, I sensed and started to claim that slam is more republican than the republic itself; it is more true to the republican ideals. I remember people who were not familiar with French society did not believe this claim, as many thought that after the riots in 2005 that the republican model of integration was in crisis. No, it is not. It is the gaps, the fractures, the *lack* of equality, freedom and brotherhood, that are the problem – not the ideals themselves. With closer investigation of the interview with Johann, I discovered that his use of the metaphor of the Tennis Court Oath – *Serment du Jeu de Paume* – actually stated exactly this, and went even further and suggested that slam challenged or confronted the state with its actions.

The Tennis Court Oath is an extremely important metaphor and symbol from the early days of the revolution of 1789, when the assembly of “commoners” of the Third Estate – as distinguished from the minuscule First and Second Estate of clergy and nobility – confronted and defied the monarchy of Louis XVI. This act became the first symbol of national or popular sovereignty. Against the king’s command, they made an oath not to dissolve before they had come up with a constitution. The Third Estate named themselves the National Assembly, and after Louis XVI backed down and ordered the two other estates to join the third, they quickly declared the abolition of feudalism, wrote the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, and the principles of the *Constitution*. Confrontation and opposition to injustice constitute a very strong ethos or trope in French society, and I believe much of this attitude comes from this key national symbol. I will return to this in Chapter 9.

The bare human, relational art, the society of the spectacle and direct democracy

The performances at slam sessions consist of not much more accessory⁸ than the everyday clothes of the slammers and the everyday surroundings of the café, theatre or bar. The everydayness of faces, attire and surroundings are usually down-to-earth and inconspicuous, often directly modest. They bear no signs of being made-up and decorated for a show. Thus moreover than just expressing no boundary between life and stage persona, stage and world – “the stage is all the world, and all the players merely men and women” – I will here suggest that the inconspicuousness expresses a certain conception of the world. As I will show in the session I describe in detail in Chapter 6, an anti-commercial and anti-consumerist ethics is inherent in many texts as well as in comments throughout the event. The stance is reaffirmed through ironic comments, such as “to be a slammer today, you’ll have to sell records,” as Dgiz remarked, pointing his finger at the ill-conceived understanding of slam in the media and the record industry as something that can be transferred to an album. Several other examples that emerged the same night express similar attitudes. I will quote one of these poems, Amaranta’s “Slamitération”, as it expresses a widespread perspective on why slam, which creates relations, is preferable to television and commercialised pop culture and consumerism, which isolates you and sells you illusions.

Slamitération, by Amaranta⁹ⁱ

Slamming
It’s my mission
To break the fiction
Sung by Céline Dion
And if you’ve not got your ration
Champion [alluding to a television show]

⁸ The double bass of Dgiz is the only exception I can think of.

⁹ All poems are translated by me. My translations are literal and unfortunately do not retain the lyrical features like rhyme, assonances, alliterations and many of the puns of the poems.

Watch the horizon
You'll see the reasons for leaving your house
Fraternise, if not
The four seasons
Will become
A funeral oration
On our condition
If that's already your vision
The days from today
Lost in the shelves
You search for the new soap
That makes you look less idiot
[people laugh]
can you sing ma bohème
and be a businessman?
Neither written poetry, nor oral poetry
Neither rap nor chant nor slam
To say [dire] is a battle
To get away from the cattle (*betail*)
Who leaves on the rails
The gigantic housing estates
Against the metal magicians
Suppressing almost
Every vital space
But our words resonate
All the way to the corridors of Babylon
Because the Earth is for no one
And every day I hope the bell tolls

For who are these slammers who whistle at the feasts?
For those who cry deep in their apathetic corners

All the world is invited
to the aesthete of language
To the last of the creatures
There's nothing to do
We have chosen
The last
Class
The freedom on earth

Listen to the alert
Of the already half-open era
The words of the experts
Of the eternal theme
Awaken our pallid mornings
Love
Improvised lesson
United by the verse
To be desired
Armed with laser pencils
We send rays
At the bitter barriers (*cloisons*)

For who are these slammers who whistle at the parties?
For those who die lonely in the modern prisons

No God no Buddha no Islam
No Karma no Spirit no Soul
The essence/petrol (*essence*) of the word is the flame
of a crowd who cry out
A wave of profane poetry

That glides in the atmosphere
And makes hell tip over
Towards the flow of the blue river
Of our calm dreams
And every night I hope

The imagery of using speech as a means to get away from the “cattle” on their way to the sheepfold or butcher is stated in various ways in the milieu. Amaranta’s critique of the housing estates is also typical. That slam attacks and can break down various kinds of barriers (*cloisons*, to “de-compartmentalise” *décloisonne*) and that it unites are also part of the ethos, together with the all-inclusive invitation to join the community. Slam breaks down barriers between humans when they express their emotions and communicate (see Chapter 7).

I find a strong connection between the Do It Yourself (DIY)-ethos of punk and the all-inclusive, almost “lowbrow” simplicity of slam. Both movements are inspired – if not usually consciously and acknowledged – by the 1950s and 60s Situationist movement.¹⁰ In *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord, the leading figure of the Situationists, described the “spectacle” as the historical period when the commodity has totally colonised social life. In the following quote, Guy Debord explains the idea behind the creation of “situations” which can interrupt or unveil the “spectacle” as “a pseudo-use of life” (2009: 41). It causes alienation and reification of the world. Instead of identifying with the “heroes of the spectacle” (like Céline Dion in Amaranta’s poem), the Situationists’ aim for provoking people to revolutionise their own life (1957) through “situations”. DIY movements like punk and slam bare a clear resemblance to Debord’s description of the aim of “situations”:

The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing “public” must constantly diminish,

¹⁰ David Graeber (2009) shows how common Situationist ideas are among anarchists and in direct action political organisation. According to him, punk has contributed significantly to spread Situationist ideas and political action, particularly through the DIY ethos: “Form your own band. Refuse to be a consumer. ... If possible, refuse wage labor. Do not submit to the logic of exchange. Reuse and redeploy fragments of the spectacle and commodity system to fashion artistic weapons to subvert it” (Graeber 2009: 259).

while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, “livers,” must steadily increase. We have to multiply poetic subjects and objects [...] and we have to organize games for these poetic subjects to play with these poetic objects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else. (Guy Debord 1957)¹¹

Slam is similar to punk in the sense that the aim is to play and express yourself. The slam session – defined as ephemeral moments of encounter (Dgiz), or the fullest possible relation between artist and audience, or between something within themselves as well as within persons in the audience (Damien and Tô) – can also be seen as an artwork in itself, as Johann suggested. The art critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud drew heavily on Guy Debord and The Situationists when he developed the notion of relational aesthetics to describe a whole generation of artists in the 1990s who made a political statement by turning social relations into an issue (Bourriaud 2002 [1998]). Bourriaud theorises only visual arts, but the politico-economical processes he sees leading to a relational emphasis for many artists are highly relevant for the development of the phenomenon of slam as well. Relational art springs out of what Bourriaud calls “the society of extras”, which is one step further towards the “alienation” from “real life” than the “society of spectacle” of the 1950s and 60s that Debord wrote about:

The ideal subject of the society of extras is [...] reduced to condition of a consumer of time and space. For anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish. Before long, it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas. So here we are summoned to talk about things around a duly priced drink as a symbolic form of contemporary human relations. You are looking for shared warmth, and the comforting feeling of a well-being for two? So try our coffee... The space of current relations is thus the space most severely affected by general

¹¹ <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html> (accessed 23.10.2011).

reification. The relationship between people, as symbolised by goods or replaced by them, and signposted by logos, has to take on extreme and clandestine forms, if it is to dodge the empire of predictability. The social bond has turned into a standardised artefact. (Bourriaud 2002: 9)

“The general mechanisation of social functions gradually reduces the relational space”, Bourriaud writes (2002: 17). Machines, like the cash machine and automatic wake-up-calls, and machine-like efficiency are replacing elementary social functions that earlier provided opportunities for “exchanges, pleasure and squabbling” (2002: 17). Relational art, on the other hand, “tightens the space of relations” (Bourriaud 2002: 15), similarly, I will show (in Chapter 8), to how slammers conceptualise the relationship between artist and audience. Through the formation of an artwork, Bourriaud writes,

the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousness. Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world. (Bourriaud 2002: 22).

Art¹² is according to Bourriaud “an activity consisting of producing relationship with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects” (2002: 107). In his opinion, all works of art are attempts at engaging in a dialogue, but their form can be more or less democratic, more or less inviting to relations more or less on the terms of all participants. In slam, the very sociality, taking place on the terrain of the session, is the artistic outcome, as Johann (Yo) defined it.

A life in the open – the presencing nature of poetry

Many practitioners describe slam as creating an “opening” (*ouverture*) and as able to “decompartmentalise” (*décloisonner*), remove partitions of various kinds, as I will show in numerous ways in the following chapters. Although I will return to the French suburbs,

¹² Relational art he defines as a “set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002: 113).

les banlieues, in the next part of the introduction, it should be addressed within this overview as well. In the following poem, Abd el Haq contrasts the closed world between the walls in the housing estates to the act of opening your eyes and mouth, and – as I understand it – to leaving the enclosed world of the suburbs. I revisit this theme in Chapter 7 on slam as therapy and on how slam can contribute to this movement towards an open world and open vision of what it means to be human.

Between the walls, by Abd el Haqⁱⁱ

Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss, we wore ourselves out under the inscription: “football forbidden.” We were free to challenge it up front. The goals, the nets, the faults, all are imaginary. No space for a referee. Only whistles for passing the rubber ball that flaps on the concrete slabs. We talked French without asking any questions, integration had no sense, sweat covered our foreheads. [...]

Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss, the garden for children adjoins the garbage premises, the motorway is the only landscape. The kids get into trouble for trifles at the corner of short memory: exchange of frank embraces against fresh scars

Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss, the fathers bet in the holidays [...] The mothers believe in bad luck, keep an eye on the sisters, and place the budget at the bottom of their bras “cup XXL” without leaving their kitchen open for permanently invited neighbours. VIP chatterboxes who loosen their gossip under a rain of “inch allah”[sic].

Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss, the first kisses, it’s in the underground parking. No time to be romantic, in the dark the kids kiss as they spit, the eyes fixed to the ground.

Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss, the time of a walk on the roofs, you quickly grasp why the population pyramid has broken ribs. Between 20 and 30, they shoot up [inject themselves] in rows, gritting their teeth. You, you open your eyes and your mouth. If the days

resemble each other, things don't repeat themselves. Between the walls in the yellow housing estate that smell of piss. (Haq 2007)

In *Bindings Against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World*, the anthropologist Tim Ingold writes, "to inhabit the world [...] is to live life, as we say colloquially, 'in the open'". The horizons of the open world "move as you do"; they do not contain or enclose you (2008: 1797).

Ingold is much inspired by Heidegger on the "foundational sense" of human dwelling in this world.¹³ In the essay "...Poetically man dwells..." – centred on a poem by Hölderlin – Heidegger (1971) searches for "the basic character of human existence" and finds it in *poiesis* – the creative force of bringing forth or rather unconcealing truth (*aletheia*)¹⁴.

[W]e are to think of what is called man's existence by way of the nature of dwelling; for another, we are to think of the nature of poetry as a letting-dwell, as a – perhaps even *the* – distinctive kind of building. If we search out the nature of poetry according to this viewpoint, then we arrive at the nature of dwelling. (Heidegger 1971: 213, italics in original)

Poetic creation – *poiesis* – is what really lets us dwell in this world (Heidegger 1971: 213). "Man is man," Heidegger writes, in gazing upwards towards the sky, and measuring himself against something heavenly, nevertheless remaining on the earth (1971: 218-19). The dwelling depends on both the upward gaze as well as the residing on earth; on the mysterious disclosing of "the god who remains unknown, [...] revealed *as* such [i.e. unknown] by the sky" (1971: 220) as well as existing as a mortal (1971: 219). This duality of human existence resides in both dwelling and poetry, in living on earth

¹³ The articles I discuss here by Ingold and Heidegger seem to share the same underlying assumptions about "a life in the open" and the creative forces of dwelling, but they focus their attention in two different directions, Ingold on the "ever-evolving weave" of the world, Heidegger on the common creative force found in dwelling and in poetry.

¹⁴ According to Hubert L. Dreyfus, Heidegger understands the Greek term *aletheia* as "unforgetting", *a-letheia* (after the river of forgetfulness, Lethe). It means "taking entities out of their hiddenness and letting them be seen in their unhiddenness" (Heidegger quoted in Dreyfus 1991: 270).

and in poetic creativity. Heidegger then goes on to describe how poetry – the *poiesis*, bringing forth, unconcealment – works:

The nature of the image is to let something be seen. [...] Because poetry takes that mysterious measure [of the dimension spanning sky and earth], to wit, in the face of the sky, therefor it speaks in “images.” This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense. Not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar. (Heidegger 1971: 223)

The alien and the strangeness can be “the god remaining unknown”,¹⁵ or like another image Heidegger takes from Hölderlin, the “radiance of its [the sky’s] height is itself the darkness of its all-sheltering breadth. The blue of the sky’s lovely blueness is the color of depth” (1971: 224). Poetic imagery brings us in touch with the mysterious, the alien, and the unknown.¹⁶

“Man *is*” (1971: 221), Heidegger writes, and poetry “admits man’s dwelling into its [i.e. poetry’s] very nature, its presencing being” (1971: 225). What does it mean that human beings *are* and that poetry has a “presencing nature”? The latter means at least that poetry can bring a human in connection with his or her *being*. Poetry and dwelling belong together and call for each other (1971: 225): Humans have an earthly life, but the upward gaze brings in the dimension of measuring oneself with the sky, or “the godhead” as Hölderlin and Heidegger put it. However, it is “Kindness, the Pure” that makes this measurement possible, they claim. Heidegger finds this kindness to mean the Greek word *Χάρις*, (*Charis*). He does not go further into the meaning and history of this term,¹⁷ but concludes his analysis of Hölderlin by exposing that as “long as this arrival of kindness endures, so long does man succeed in measuring himself not unhappily against the

¹⁵ Heidegger writes god without capital letter. He is not talking about a Christian, or any other monotheistic god in particular. I read it thus as a metaphor, “an image” of something mysterious, alien, that remains unknown.

¹⁶ I will return to how slam poets think about their work in Chapter 8, on “How slam animate at the deepest level with the help of emotions, words and *poiesis*”.

¹⁷ To analyse the meaning of *Χάρις* is too big a task at the moment, although I recognise that there probably is much to find in such an investigation. Briefly, I suggest that it first meant “grace”, then it developed into the Christian grace, which again lead to notions of Charity.

godhead” (1971: 227). Apparently it is “kindness” that allows humans to measure themselves against something larger than themselves, and it is this measurement that allows humans to create poetry – and thus “dwell humanly on this earth” (1971: 227). I am a bit at loss at exactly what Heidegger means by the notion of kindness, but for the purpose of this thesis, I choose to interpret it as an opening up towards others in any kind of act of graciousness and generosity. The writing of poetry among the performance poets in this thesis always have in mind the relation their poems should be able to create with other people. I believe “to dwell humanly” – with grace and in kindness, perhaps – approaches an answer to what it means that human beings *are*. I will return to this issue in later chapters.

To the insights of Ingold, Heidegger and Hölderlin, I would like to add a poem, from the Parisian slam scene, which treats in my view the same existential questioning. To the extent that there exists an explicit human ontology in Parisian slam, this poem might be close to it. The poem starts as a rejection of the political project and way of life of the previous generation (Tô is born in 1971), particularly the *soixant-huitards* (generation of 1968) and the hippies. However, in the course of ridding himself of his predecessors, the poet turns towards a positive ontology of what it is to be human without the separatist political “isms”, battles and ideas and “disincarnated ideals” which “loses sense of smell and the feel for the track” – or for dwelling and *being*.

The orphans, by Antoine Faure (Tô)ⁱⁱⁱ

We are the orphans, the fatherless
The skinless, the restless, the referenceless
The referentless – the reverendless

We are the lost children, abandoned along the road like annoying dogs by
annoyed owners, at the dawn of a summer that never came.

This old human road paved with doubts, paved with crusts (*croûtes*), the old
trite values blinded by the grand Illusion,

We walk it backing away by fear, to not repeat the old droning. Disappointed we are, by our skin (*peaux*) and our kin (*pères*), by the entire humanity.

You wanted to break it all from the height of your ephemeral guardrails and you were right, it was the time, it had to be done.

But you were thinking then, that you'd be better than the ones before you, than the past that seemed out-of-date, and you were dreaming, with your flowers, your acids and your banners or your red books like rough bibles. You were firing deaf bullets at dry targets.

Your grand liberation and romanticism (*cui-cui les petits oiseaux*) didn't work – cunning heads with cunning ideas of teens amnesiac of their acne – you're never to plant again any seeds under the large cedars, life has caught up with you, life has caught up with you, has recaptured your skinny bodies because you were dancing on emptiness and not on the dust of the bones of your elders.

And nothing has really changed. You have made fall the last bastions of futile belief that meant to be fertile, the last distant horizons of better tomorrows that will never sing. You have cut the last roots of the disincarnated ideals.

One doesn't change society by leaving the human by the side, and its deep pit where the sceptic has always hidden. You've misjudged the power of the mud/ooze (*boue*), the pure dynamic slurry/manure (*purin*) from where all life might spring. That's what you've left us with.

We are the orphans, the fatherless
The skinless, the rest less, the referenceless
The referentless – the reverendless

And we don't want any more ideas. They've always hid something finally doubtful behind all the fine discourse and beautiful prose,

no more unsound principles, rigid and frigid always pulling towards the putrid and the power of the vultures, neither the system, always perverse, always sordid.

The human of white battle flags, of gold flag or blue or black or blood-red, of useless appendix, of protective shell, we reject it now. We don't want more schism of "–isms" and the always separatist bits of truth. When one is somethingist, one withdraws, one loses sense of smell and the feel for the track, one resigns, one denigrates the multiple, the real and the mystery.
[...]

It's life that we want. Life.

Yes, we're afraid, but it's life that we want. Life.

We want to put up to date all the possibilities, sense in full the stimulus of the humus. We want to find the grand she-wolf and put down Remus and Romulus. We want to tear the stained robe of Pontus Pilates who still washes his hands. Down with the Roman Empire. Down with the Roman Empire. Down with all the worse and worse empires! We want to become humans, whole, complete, incarnated, in totality of non-distrainable/intangible living components (*composantes du vivant insaisissable*), for only one phrase is left for us, two words of dirt-proof meaning: "I am". Yes, a path of different taste for everyone and finally the same day for all, and the same day for all.

The milk of the stars, the blue blood of the sky and the black fire of earth are still to be drunk, but no flag, no drape, no protective curtain, to forge in the secrets of the soul, to take the summits by seize by the waist, the hopes, the abysses and the setbacks, to make grow the faith and the flame, to make grow the faith and the flame!

We are the orphans, the fatherless

The skinless, the restless, the referenceless

The referentless - the reverendless

We are denser: more false – more true – more sickly – more valiant – more lax (*lâche*) – more happy – we always search for the sense.

And we're only just about to understand that it's up to us now to forge the world to leave our heritage, to leave on another page, the track of our lead.

All is already done
but nothing has yet been!

The human apparently springs from the primordial mud/ooze, and it is in a return to “the humus”, “the multiple”, “the real” and “the mystery” the poet sees hope (“the faith and the flame”):

We want to become humans, whole, complete, incarnated, in totality of non-distrainable/intangible living components, for only one phrase is left for us, two words of dirt-proof meaning: “I am”.

In the next line “a path of different taste for everyone and finally the same day for all”, I find an unwritten motto of egalitarian and heterogeneity for much of the Parisian slam scene. It is the *becoming* universal human of difference that I claim is the human being of the ontology of slam (see Chapter 10).

I will finish this presentation of the horizon of slam with an explication of my overarching perspective of slam as ritual (Chapter 8, and to some extent Chapter 7). Engaging in a ritual, according to the anthropologist Victor Turner, is foremost to enact, to perform. He traces the etymological meaning of the verb “perform” to carrying out something, to consummate it, in the sense of bringing it about.

The rules “frame” the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood, but banks without a river epitomize aridity. [...T]he rules may “frame” the performance, but the

“flow” of action and interaction within the frame may conduce to hitherto unprecedented insights and even generate new symbols and meanings.
(Turner 1982: 79)

Important in Turner’s understanding of ritual is “the experience of subjective and intersubjective flow”¹⁸ (1982: 80). Although Parisian slam is not overtly religious, in the way slammers talk about what can happen in “ephemeral moments of encounter” (Dgiz), “moments of humanity” (Souleymane Diamanka) and “the fullest possible relation”, *plenitude* (Damien and Tô), it is however easy to recognise senses of immanent (or transcendent) power – *poiesis* – as described by Heidegger. Several slammers use the word “magic” about what can happen. I will return to “the flow” and its riverbed in the theoretical discussion, which will frame my understanding of slam in the third part of the introduction.

¹⁸ “ whatever its sociobiological or personalogical concomitants may be” (Turner 1982: 80).

Chapter 2 – Ethnographic Introduction

How I discovered slam as the perfect field site for studying the state of affairs of the Republic today

The archi-texture of lines of exclusion and inclusion – rage and poetry

In this ethnographic introduction, I will recount my first meeting with the Parisian slam poetry scene in order to set the scene of northeast Parisian streets, bars and cafés and the northern and eastern banlieues, where this art form belongs. It is a dense ethnographic depiction where I intend to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the issues discussed later. The underlying theoretical perspective addresses how social practice, acts and interactions weave the “archi-texture” (Lefebvre 1991: 118) of the (city) environment (Ingold 2007: 80-81) as well as ideological weavings of France and the belongings she fosters. The archi-textures I expose relate to the centre-banlieue divide, the existence and non-existence of ethnic relations, fear and familiarity between strangers in public space, “precarity” and “insecurity”, and encounters with the forces of law and order.

Parisian streets appeal to walking, for natives and visitors alike. It is no coincidence that *le flâneur* is a Parisian invention; likewise it is no coincidence that so much of my fieldwork took place on foot, even though that was not a conscious methodological decision. First I walked on my own to explore the local neighbourhood, then in and around a tenfold of demonstrations¹⁹ and finally with people I came to know. This part of the introduction also aims to show how movement in the city is a way of experiencing slam poetry, in the company of others on summer nights. Some people, particularly younger ones, ambulate from session to session – as there might be several

¹⁹ The demonstrations supported undocumented immigrants and opposed the new labour law and a new immigrations law.

the same night. Likewise, as in Clifford Geertz' (1973) distinction between shallow and deep play in the cock fight, many drop by at a slam session as part of a night out, in-between or in conjunction with dining, drinking and socialising. Later, when I narrowed my focus on the slam phenomenon itself, I went into a mode of deeper play, where I came early to the sessions and stayed late, and remained sober and attentive to what went on at stage. It was a very different mode of going to a slam session than what I will present shortly but will be important in the subsequent chapters. The following is a quick recapitulation of what had happened before I discovered the slam scene six months into my fieldwork.

The chance and the challenge of beginning a fieldwork on social cohesion and senses of belonging in France in October 2005

When I arrived in Paris in the autumn 2005, I aimed to explore the “dialectics between community, social integration and cosmology on the one hand and sense of belonging, identity construction, way of life and worldview on the other,” as I had written in the research proposal. The “dialectics” I had in mind were within the French republican philosophy of social integration. Here, citizenship and civic belonging are formulated in terms of the individual’s relationship to the republic, without any intermediate communities of identities. Would this “cosmology” and sense of community affect the way people conceptualised and acted out their sense of belonging in France? My aim was to compare this relationship with the multicultural philosophy prevalent in Anglo-American thought, where society is seen as consisting of a multitude of communities and where hyphenated identities are widespread, like the British (South) Asian identity I had studied the creation of in London in 1999.²⁰

A few weeks after my arrival, on the 27 October 2005, the death of the two teenagers, Zyed Banna and Bouna Traore, and the severe burning of Muhittin Altun in the *banlieue* (translates uneasily to “suburb”, I will discuss it further in the theoretical part of the introduction) Clichy-sous-Bois sparked off three weeks of riots in banlieues all over France. The youth ran from an identity check by the police and hid in a high-voltage

²⁰ I will explore the differences between the French republican and the Anglo-American liberalist notions of civic belonging and community in Chapter 9.

transformer. A state of emergency was declared in particular areas on the 8 November, allowing for the imposition of a curfew. The state of emergency law dates from 1955 and from the war in Algeria. It has been applied in Algeria on three occasions (1955, 1958 and 1961), and in New Caledonia (in 1984). Once before has it been put into force in mainland France: in Paris and the Parisian region in October 1961. In the “indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic”²¹ it concerned however only “French Muslims from Algeria”.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, the whole of France seemed in a rage, but for conflicting reasons. One part was enraged about what they saw as a long history of unequal treatment, while the other disliked what they saw as a long history of pampering immigrants and the imposition of a demand on the “native” population to repent for the colonial era. The following months, it seemed that if I was to grasp what constitutes the *vivre ensemble* (social cohesion) and belonging that I had come to France to study, I had to come to grips with the anger, its causes and its expressions.

I was still searching for a suitable site to come to grips with the puzzle of this enormous rage, when France was again hit by anger. This time it was the educated youth, who feared for their future because of the introduction of a more flexible first-employment contract (CPE²²), as part of the Law on equality of opportunities (*égalité de chances*) introduced after the social unrest in the autumn. For more than a month, hundreds of thousands of people and up to three million demonstrated weekly. There were strikes, as well as closed and barricaded universities and colleges. I was taken aback once more, by the events all around me in the streets, by the media treatment and by the structures in French society that the situation revealed.

The media struck me by their positive coverage of barricades and activism. The parents and teachers that the journalists chose to interview all emphasised that to revolt against injustice is an important lesson in democracy and the political life of the Republic. I later recognised this in other features of French society, and in slam as

²¹ From Article 1 of Constitution of the Fifth Republic: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. [...]” Source <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp> (accessed 16.11.2011)

²² CPE, *contrat première embauche* is a contract for young people under 26 years of age, which makes it easier to hire as well as fire them within two years without giving any explanation.

condensed by Johann (Yo) in the metaphor of the Tennis Court Oath. The other aspect of the coverage, I noticed, concerned the distinction that journalists and commentators made between two different kinds of youth. There were “youth from the suburb” (more on the term *jeunes de banlieue* in Chapter 4, the theoretical introduction) who rioted and robbed during demonstrations (so called *casseurs*, disturbers of demonstrations) and there were college and university students. That the latter included large numbers of youth who also lived in the suburbs was ignored by the journalists.²³

Meeting Laurent and Jean in the aftermath of the anti-CPE events

About half a year after I first arrived in Paris, all the issues I had grappled with concerning belonging, *vivre ensemble* and republicanism as well as rage and revolt, came together and united in the most imaginable perfect field site. A Friday in early June, I was invited along to the suburbs to listen to some poetry. If I was to believe Laurent, a young man I had met some days earlier, the phenomenon of slam poetry was more important than the massive protests against the new labour laws that recently had shaken France. In his opinion, the slam poetry scene was a place for truly free expression, while the anti-CPE protests were just the *bourgeoisie* concerned about petty issues of their own career.

Laurent and I had met at a support concert at the *Centre Internationale de Culture Populaire*²⁴ opposing the repression in the aftermath of the anti-CPE demonstrations. He told me he had three friends who now faced legal persecution after the occupation of La Sorbonne – a symbolic act that made headlines all over the world and made the police close off the university area for weeks afterwards. I understood that he was a frequent contributor to the discussion and alternative information website Paris.indymedia,²⁵

²³ The anthropologist Alain Bertho, who lives and works at the University in the suburb Saint Denis outside Paris, and whose son goes to a local college, sees this “disjunction of two youths” by the media and political commentators as a way of discrediting the popular youth and a way for the state to manipulate the discredited (Bertho 2009: 137-158).

²⁴ A three-story building a few minutes’ walk from where I lived during half of my fieldwork in the 11th Arrondissement. It houses more than a hundred solidarity and political organisations and is a venue for concerts, meetings, and etc. It is one of the places I, without much success, had tried to get a foothold in for fieldwork. The “international” as well as “popular” orientation of the organisations are very much in line with the general atmosphere I felt in this part of the city where all kinds of small-scale cultural or solidarity initiatives, often with an international twist, abound. I will return to this aspect of North and East Paris in Chapter 5. Next to the Centre was a small anarchist bookshop.

²⁵ Indymedia, Independent Media Center, is a left-wing (anarchist in France) alternative media with local sites many places in the world. It originates in the alter-globalisation movement born during the anti-WTO

which I had read regularly from the beginning of my stay and particularly closely during the anti-CPE protests. It was when we discussed these protests, as well as the French tendency to protest in general, that Laurent said I should come to a *soirée slam*.

A few days later, I met up with Laurent and his friend and colleague Jean at Metro Belleville to go to a slam session in the nearby Rue Saint Maur (which is a street of many cafés and bars). As is common when you meet someone in the evening in Paris, they quickly asked: *T'as mangé?* ("Have you eaten yet?"). As none of us had, we went for dinner. After a good and cheap East Asian meal (common in Belleville with its high Chinese and East Asian population, see Chapter 5) and a prolonged political discussion, we finally found the right café, but the slam session was over. There was nothing else to do than to try our luck the next evening, this time out in the banlieue. This procedure was to be more or less standard for our evenings out, as Laurent's attitude when going out was to take it as it comes, mobile in hand and always ready to postpone, rearrange or do something completely different. He rarely knew where the night would take him, and he totally relied on his mobile phone.²⁶

Jean and Laurent were colleagues in a marketing firm. "It's not our job that defines us," Jean rapidly replied when I asked what they did. Jean was about five years younger than Laurent, but he had a master in philosophy (on Foucault from La Sorbonne) while Laurent had nothing but short-term work experience after his Baccalaureate (*Bac*). He had lived at boarding school with his little brother from early teens (partly because his mother remarried, it seemed, he very rarely spoke about his family background), and according to Laurent, he had received his *Bac* just by luck. Jean – I found out little by little – worked with market analysis,²⁷ while Laurent was a sales representative. From our

protests in Seattle in 1999. Indymedia belongs to the picture of Parisian slam not because slammers use the site, which I don't think they do, but because it is an expression of the same democratic and egalitarian do it yourself (DIY) logic to which slam belongs: While one say publish news yourself, the other say write and perform your own poetry.

²⁶ Laurent is not a practitioner of slam himself, but as I will show, he shares many characteristics with people in the milieu. Like Laurent, who spends much time outdoors meeting people, for most slammers the mobile is indispensable also (like the Internet, see footnote above). Before Facebook, many slammers invited people to their sessions by sms, and it was rather over the mobile than via e-mail that they were hired for arranging workshops (more on this later), holding concerts and collaborating with others. The possibilities for self-organising that the internet and the mobile provide are essential for the structure and organisation of the highly fluid slam scene.

²⁷ He finds his job meaningless and deeply depressing and tries to pass the extremely demanding exams for entering the teachers academy in order to get away from it.

first evening onwards, we often talked about work conditions, as it was the labour law protests that had brought us together. “We’ve been through all the situations of French precarity,²⁸” Jean told me when we met. His comment was almost like an introduction to what he probably had heard from Laurent that I wanted to discuss.

Jean had helped Laurent to obtain a CDI (*contrat à durée indéterminée* “permanent contract”) at the firm, as one of ten out of the 25 who were constantly working there. He apparently also helped him to keep it, by phoning him on Saturday mornings so he got his suit – his work clothes – to the drycleaner, and even, as Jean told me later, to wake him up in the morning so he would not be late for work. The economical backdrop to Laurent and Jean’s work conditions is important: The official unemployment rate in France is 9%. For young people it is twice that, and for people without qualifications, like Laurent, it is probably much higher. Laurent knows he is lucky to have that kind of job, as he says his colleagues have at least three years of higher education. In addition, the streets of Paris are full of homeless people (*SDFs sans domicile fixe*), and on the news one frequently hears stories about people losing their steady job, then their apartment and then ending up in real *précarité*.

Nine hours of fieldwork and how I discovered slam poetry on a trip to the suburbs and back again

The Friday evening trip to the banlieue was to be typical in terms of planning and postponing. We planned where and when to meet by a few brief e-mails, a couple of text messages and a phone call or two. Even on Fridays Laurent did not leave work until after 6 p.m. He postponed our *rendezvous* a couple of times, but was still late. It was 9 p.m., but early June and still light. I stood waiting by the metro exit in the eastern *banlieue* Montreuil. The Montreuil open food market had just closed for the day, and the green-clad municipal road-sweepers (*balayeurs*) were now doing their work with their small, green road-sweeping machines. I stood watching the lively street life around me, thinking about how all the other white women of my age were dressed down in dark or

²⁸ *Précarité*, “precariousness” – or “precarity” which recently has become a term in English language social science at least – which plays a prominent role in French and continental political discourse the last years, particularly on the left as a critique of economic liberalism.

anonymous colours, and how it reassured me to be dressed inconspicuously as I stood alone waiting. Then Laurent came up the stairs from the metro, mobile in hand, phoning Jean.²⁹

A life in the open versus a contained life – Paris and the suburbs

When we had found the way to the bus station, we saw the bus leave right in front of us, but as we refused the *banlieusard* destiny of waiting 20 minutes for the next one, we started walking. Only a handful of metro stations are situated outside the Parisian loop or bypass, *le boulevard périphérique*, and one is left with far less frequent buses and the regional train, the RER (*réseau express régional*). If one misses the bus one is deemed to wait far longer than in Paris proper, where the public transport networks are tight-knit, frequent running and reliable. As we walked, we talked about the *coupure* (“division/divide”) and that we had now entered the mythic 9-3 (*neuf-trois*³⁰), the *département* which together with the 94, was hardest hit by the riots six months earlier in November.³¹ Along the bus itinerary, we saw nothing of the high-rise towers of the notorious housing estates (*cités*) from the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, the tree-lined avenues took us through areas with two-storey houses surrounded by low fences and tiny gardens.

After a bit of walking, the bus – crammed and hot, as Laurent and Jean had predicted – arrived and took us the last bit. Finally in Fontenay-sous-Bois, we had problems finding the right direction to the little café. In Paris, this is never a problem, as there are always people around to ask. Here, we eventually found two men, of North

²⁹ But Laurent still commented on my defensive posture, hands in pockets, and slightly negative or aggressive expression, despite me feeling rather self-assured.... *T’as peur?* – “You’re afraid?” Jean often asked me when I apparently looked a bit apprehensive. I discuss the importance of facial expressions and bodily postures in public later.

³⁰ Normally, the code number of the *départements* is pronounced “ninety-three”, “ninety-four” etc., but the “ninety-three” is frequently referred to as 9-3 (*neuf-trois*), even by TV presenters and at the highbrow radio channel *France Culture*. According to Louis, a young man from the suburbs we will meet in Chapter 11 on the recent re-appropriation of French history, rappers invented or at least spread this name.

³¹ That the *peripherique* really constituted a divide, not only in terms of the decrease in public transport, but also in accessibility in general, I discovered the day after, when I had to go back and fetch a notebook I had forgotten the night before. Getting there by bike was an adventure in itself. The distance is no more than 6-7 kilometres (similar to the distance – but not in terms of time and confusion – I cycled from the east to north inside Paris to visit Laurent), and it is quite flat, but it was incredibly difficult to find my way in between major roads, housing estates and residential areas. Again a stark contrast to the frequent public maps, bicycle lanes and pedestrian and bicycle conveniences in Paris *intra-muros*.

African origin, washing their car outside one of these small, two-storey houses. As we walked back and forth along the deserted avenue a couple of times, Laurent commented on one of the latest scares concerning fear in public places (*insécurité*³²) in the *banlieues*: the assault on a bus driver. He wouldn't be surprised if these incidents often start by someone who is just missing the bus, he said. "If you miss the bus or the metro in the city, you just wait some minutes for the next one, while here the consequences are more serious. Perhaps you knock hard on the door as the bus drives off without you. Then someone calls the police and there they go again..."³³

The three of us have now finally arrived at our destination. Before I proceed with the story, however, I would like to make a brief remark: Inside Paris, the public transport system is smooth running; it is almost as if the metro and bus lines run continuously, with only a few minutes of intervals, and the stations or stops are never far apart. (I have even experienced many times that buses stop to pick up, and sometimes let off passengers also at points that are not designated bus stops).³⁴ This sense of freedom of movement can be – as I have tried to show – radically limited in the suburbs. And, as I will show later and particularly in Chapter 7 (on slam as therapy), to realise that you can leave the suburb can be like coming to an open world, with non-enclosing horizons. I think the way the transport system works differently in the two places enhances the feeling of freedom of movement in an open world in Paris, contra a more confined life in the suburbs. As I showed with Heidegger's poetic and *poietic* measurement spanning sky and earth, the issue of movement and an open horizon is as metaphysical as it is physical.

³² *Insécurité*, "insecurity", connotes particularly to fear in public places – or "urban violence" – (but also road and food safety) and thus connotes in more or less subtle ways for "youth from the suburbs" and "immigrants". It is the core of a "law and order"-based right-wing and extreme right-wing political agenda, which more or less openly also connects "delinquency to "the banlieues", thus to "immigrant youth".

³³ Bus burning is a quite frequent ingredient in the "urban violence" in the *banlieues*, particularly during the 2005 riots. The anthropologist Alain Bertho comments that "the busses are undoubtedly the most discriminatory, even vexatious means of public transport. It is expensive and easily controlled; it bypasses sometimes neighbourhoods with a difficult reputation or stop serving them at the end of the afternoon" (Bertho 2009: 108).

³⁴ In addition, there are now (in 2011) circa 1800 stations for cheap rent (19-39 Euros per annum) of bicycles all around Paris, the *velib'* (*velo libre*, "free bike").

La Milonga

The bar and adjoining restaurant *La Milonga* lie in a short row of semidetached two-story houses, which as I discovered later, are situated next to a large high-rise estate project. It had become dark by now, and the predominantly residential area looked deserted. I am not sure if it was the “banlieue youth” – shaven heads, tracksuits, hoods and caps – hanging around outside the entrance, or the generally responsible and gallant attitude of (most) French men that made the locking of my bike (among other things) a high priority collective undertaking. After we had agreed that my bike was locked in the best possible way, we entered the café *La Milonga*, right after the youth. The surprise I felt as my perception of these youth rapidly changed, disoriented and brought into conscience stereotypes I apparently held unconsciously. This realisation and self-awareness to the extent of transformation is pivotal in my initial experience of slam, and I will explore the phenomenon further in Chapter 10.

In fact, I was surprised by the entire atmosphere: Inside the narrow and crowded bar, it was utterly silent. Quite a few of the customers were jotting on small pieces of paper. I felt I had to whisper when I ordered at the counter. As we found our way farther into the bar, Jean asked me, as he quickly got into the habit of when we entered unfamiliar places or milieus *T’as peur?* “You’re afraid?” (He had asked the same when we entered the laid-back and informal Chinese dominated restaurant in Belleville the day before as well). I did not fully understand the whole range of this slightly intrusive question before long afterwards, when Jean, once we were out walking, pointed to an old man who hurried apprehensively along the dusking street: “He’s afraid,” he said. Jean judged that the old man had bought into the widespread discourse on insecurity (*insécurité*). I suddenly grasped that in Jean’s opinion, to show fear in public and unfamiliar places is a political statement: It concedes to this right wing discourse of fear of strangers in public places. This discourse suggests that strangers threaten the social tissue. According to Jean and others sceptical of the right-wing law and order perspective, however, acting as if you are afraid of strangers is what breaks the social bonds. Instead, openness to strangers is what is called for, both in weaving social “architecture” and in public political expression. The attitude of openness will be an important issue in the thesis.

*La Milonga*³⁵ is a rare bird in the French suburban cultural landscape. It consists of one restaurant next door to a “cultural space” or bar. According to their self description, La Milonga is a

place for aficionados of party and all forms of art. House for protecting the so-called “unrealistic” ideals, the freedoms of expression, and cultural openness. No to prejudices and fences/barriers (*barrières*), yes to generosity and audaciousness³⁶

On their Internet site, they say that after the opening in 2004, they quickly became a “place for exchange” (*lieu d'échange*) – a term frequently used to describe slam as well, in addition to *lieu de rencontre* (“meeting place”) – “thanks to the public, clients who have become friends. They come to improvise in jazz, give life to marionettes, create performances, play theatre, recite poems [...] and Argentinian tango courses, of course”. In an area apparently in great need of cultural activities, as it looked rather desolate, they host various artistic courses and workshops – like tango, percussion, theatre improvisations, lantern-making – as well as concerts and open slam sessions. It is run partly on a voluntary basis, but one can pay a support membership (10€/5€ for students and the unemployed per annum). The slam at La Milonga is one of the very few non-municipal initiatives I have been to in the banlieues, as slam sessions and workshops in these areas are usually financed and organised top-down on municipal initiative, in contrast to *intra-muros* where bottom-up initiatives are prevalent. The large majority of the slam sessions take place in Paris proper, thus from the bottom-up.

The slam session at La Milonga was taking place in the back room. There was no more space on the two rows of wooden benches, so we sat down in the back. I could see

³⁵ Milonga means both a music style and a dance that originated in the Río de la Plata area of Argentina and Uruguay, and the place it is danced. The name is derived from the word for “lyrics”, is much inspired by African and Latin-American Candombe music and precedes the tango. (Source Wikipedia: Milonga accessed 20.09.2011)

³⁶ On their webpage, the name Milonga is made into an acronym for this little text I have translated into English. The French original is as follows: “Lieu pour/Aficionados de la fête, de l’art sous toutes les formes // Maison pour la sauvegarde des/ Idéaux dits « irréalistes », des/ Libertés d’expression et des/ Ouvertures culturelles/ Non aux préjugés et aux barrières, oui à la/ Générosité et à l’/ Audace”
<http://www.lamilonga.fr/> (Accessed 2.09.2011)

the “banlieue boys” who hung around the entrance when we came, were now sitting beside each other farther in front, amid a remarkably diverse audience. Altogether we were around fifty. In their late teens, the boys were probably among the youngest, while the oldest were in their sixties or seventies. I was used to the very mixed clientele in terms of age, social background and dress code, and to some extent skin colour in bars and bistros in general in my neighbourhood in East Paris, but here the mix of colour as well as ethnic background³⁷ was even more prevalent. Subconsciously, I considered the transformation of the banlieue boys – from possible bike thieves to fellow poetry listeners. I only became aware of my perception later when I analysed my reaction to them: My slight surprise at seeing them in the first row at such a mixed night of poetry, and afterwards my shame over being so prejudiced and thinking that they could steal my bike.

I quickly realised what the silence and writing when we entered was about: The host (*animateur*) MC Tsunami – a slightly weary looking man in his mid- to late forties, with his straight grey hair in a tight, long ponytail – had given the audience the task of creating a text containing eight specific words. (These words were probably suggested by the audience themselves. We arrived late, so I do not know for this particular night, but that was the case at slam workshops I attended later). Tsunami later told me that he used that technique when there were not enough people who signed up with prepared texts at the beginning of the session. That was not necessary at any of the slam sessions I later attended.

I sharpened my attention for what was happening on the stage when I heard that anger (*colère*) was one of the eight words.³⁸ No other word in my opinion better described the mood in France the six months I had been there. I heard a middle-aged man perform about his youth in Alger in the 1950s: how they were taught about *nos ancêtres*

³⁷ By “skin colour” I mean nothing more than just that. Skin colour in Paris, Marseille and probably elsewhere in France, make up a continuum. I have found terms connoting ethnic background and ethnicity to be very rarely used in the environment of slam. I will therefore only use them to a very limited degree, for the most part in contexts and situations where the categories have implications either in words or action. For instance, in the following paragraph, as well as in Chapter 6, they are relevant in the sense that I want to convey how heterogeneous the slam milieu is, compared to any other arena I know. This sparse use of ethnic taxonomy is not meant as a denial of the existence of racism or specifically “racialised” experiences. I will return to this fundamental point later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 4.

³⁸ Some of the other words were “red”, “love” and “fervour” (or “hard porn actor”, the two are homonyms (*h)ardeur*).

*les Gaulois*³⁹ (“our ancestors the Gauls”) at school, how he ate bouillabaisse and cycled around with a beret and baguettes. But despite all this Frenchness (expressed through funny and widespread stereotypes), they still shouted a slogan in Arabic. This slogan composed the refrain of his text, which quite a few in the audience started to join in on (thus showing that they knew it, or at least knew Arabic). This text was obviously prepared in advance. So was an erotic poem by a girl from Stockholm – Tunisian-Swedish, I later found out from a slam anthology – playing on the double meaning of *ma langue* – “my language”/“my tongue”. An elderly white woman – Marie-Françoise, I quickly learnt – read a text from Victor Hugo (on his relationship to a prostitute, the performer introduced her text by talking about the brothels opened in Berlin during the ongoing World Championship in football). I was to hear this text several times and at various venues later this summer, as Marie-Françoise is active in the milieu (and I will return to her in Chapters 6 and 10). There were between ten and 15 performances, lasting from a few and up to five minutes.

A number of features struck me right from the moment I had entered *La Milonga*. The first was the extreme diversity of the audience, as well as participants – a diversity I have never experienced, in France or anywhere else. Second, the themes were extremely varied – from cycling in Alger to the eroticism of language and tongue – but throughout this variety many of them had a strong social, political and personal pertinence. A notion that came to mind immediately as a way to describe the passion and incarnation in the performances was “authenticity”. In my analysis, I have moved away from this term and towards indigenous understandings of “sincerity” and “truth” (see particularly Chapters 4, 7 and 8), which I believe describes my initial feeling of personal pertinence in the texts, performances and “presence” in front of the audience more precisely. The fourth feature that struck me was the audience participation. The silence and the writing signalled that everybody took part, not only in the back room but all the way out in the bar (although not everybody went up on stage afterwards). I was later to discover that this blurring between audience and performers is a fundamental characteristic of Parisian slam poetry – the very definition of this “fungus thread” of Parisian slam is the open

³⁹ This sentence is a standing joke about the teaching of history in French schools, including in the overseas territories as well as all over the world during colonialism.

stage (a definition that is lost on most journalists reporting on the phenomenon, as well as on the record industry). Another aspect of this participation was the encouragement and applause the audience gave the performer. This was partly initiated by the host, who asked for extra applause for debutants and especially the nervous ones, but also an act of generosity the audience engaged in spontaneously.

Back in medias res in Fontenay-sous-Bois: Quickly after we entered the bar, Laurent left Jean and me. He had been around, saying hello to various people he knew more or less well. Now, he had discovered that the person he had planned to meet here, had already left in order to go to another *soirée slam* in Rue Oberkampf, a street known for its restaurants and nightlife in Northeast Paris. In the pause between the second and third set, I suggested that we went back to Paris and Rue Oberkampf. We left together with a young man in his early twenties, whom none of us knew, dressed in quite fancy brown corduroy trousers and a dark jacket, (a typical outfit for many French students and intellectuals, and quite a bit more stylish than the average slam poetry-goer, at least at his young age). In his hand he carried the papers from the text he had performed (probably before we arrived, as neither the other two nor I could remember his performance).

The bus trip to *Nouvelle France*

It was 23h20 when we got to the bus stop. We were lucky this time and the bus arrived almost immediately. The female bus driver said we could bring my foldable bike if we folded it, so we took it on board. (That I had brought along the bike at all, was due to a misunderstanding.) We hardly had time to consider whether to actually bother to fold it or not before I noticed how the three others suddenly froze. They understood right away that the five body-builder looking men (large, muscular, with millimetre short hair, black bomber jackets and army trousers) who entered at the next stop were ticket controllers. What happened next was quite absurd. Together we committed five offences, but none of them were commented on by the controllers: I did not have a valid ticket, but tried my luck with a ticket from earlier in the evening, visibly punched far too early for this bus ride. The three others had seasonal tickets, one not valid for the zone, two not yet validated for the new month. Then the controller asked whose bike it was, and after a

little back and forth – lasting maybe 30 seconds – he said; “I’m just telling you it’s not allowed with bikes here, foldable or not”.

To the other passengers it must have appeared as everything was all right with us. It was however soon clear to the whole bus that everything was not all right with a black woman, around forty, in tight jeans and blouse and with thin, long bleached plaits. The incident did not catch my attention before the controller shouted (to one of his colleagues) that they had to get a car to get this woman to the police station. Obviously, she had not stamped her ticket, neither did she have valid identity papers – thus finding herself in the same position as I (equally without papers and an overdue stay in France), however not that serious, as she had not brought along a bike. For her to be brought in for not carrying identity papers could however be far more serious than for me, as everybody, including the controller, knows that it is far more likely that an African foreigner did not have a residence permit than a blond, blue-eyed foreigner.⁴⁰ Roundups and expulsions take place on a frequent basis in the northern and eastern *arrondissements* in Paris, as well as in the *banlieues populaires*. Whether the controller actually knew her residence status or not, I do not know, but his scheme worked: She started crying when he called for the car to bring her in. The rest of the 10-15 minutes bus trip, the controller spent trying to chat her up, and they eventually exchanged pieces of paper, perhaps phone numbers. (I have no idea what actually happened, but it seemed to me that he let her go because she accepted to flirt with him, and perhaps give him her phone number.) I could hear her forced giggles while this went on – as well as her anger and frustration after the five men finally got off the bus, and she forcefully hit the stop button to get off.

While this was happening, Jean and Laurent overtly showed that they were listening. Presumably in order to signal to the woman that she was not alone and to the controllers that they were under attention. Roundups of immigrants in North and East Paris are very often filmed with whatever camera people have ready, usually their phones, in order to document to what extent police brutality takes place, or perhaps to display to the police that they are being watched and recorded. Videos like that are often

⁴⁰ There was one more difference between us: I was accompanied by three (whitish) native-speaking men; she was sitting beside another (dark-skinned) woman. The controller knew very well where best to abuse his powers, and the situation is perhaps more a sign of structural “racial” or national inequalities than individual or personal racism.

uploaded to sites like Indymedia. Laurent, Jean and I often discussed roundups like this and possible ways for the public to intervene – one of Laurent’s favourite topics. Laurent saw civil disobedience as an ingrained part of the acting out of citizenship, *actes de citoyenneté*. As I will show in Chapter 5, this is a common view in the mobilisation of undocumented immigrants, and – importantly at the time – against the new immigration law proposed by the then Interior Minister Sarkozy.

The young man we left the session with started speaking a little frantically when he had discovered that the controllers let him go with an invalid ticket. After a while I had to ask him to be quiet, as the situation being played out right in front of us was clearly interesting for an anthropologist doing research on postcolonial Paris (paradoxically he talked about my research and his own studies in anthropology – I was right when I guessed him to be a student). When I mentioned his inattentiveness to my two friends afterwards, they right away interpreted it as an ostrich reaction typical for the French people in the present tense political situation. According to them and many others, one year before the election with the Interior Minister Sarkozy running as the leading candidate, “They act like they see and hear nothing.” Jean and Laurent are very critical of the present political situation in France, the politicians in practically the whole of the political spectrum as well as the passivity of the majority of the French population. This cynical view of the political state of affairs, they share with the slam milieu, as will be apparent in Chapter 6. When the controllers got off at the bus stop called *Nouvelle France* (“New France”), Jean and Laurent found it to be a dark omen for the next year’s presidential election.

Plex Y glass, Rue Oberkampf, Paris East

We arrived *intra-muros* without further problems, and we even found the place where we were going without too much difficulty. However, it was due to a strange coincidence. Of the handful of people I had got to know in Paris, it would turn out that two of them knew each other already (Laurent and Henri), and it appeared that I had already heard of this bar in Rue Oberkampf. I had also heard that one could come and declaim one’s grievances or poems there; my acquaintance Louis (whose story I will recount in the final chapter) seemed to have found some relief in shouting his frustration in the open

microphone there. I had not yet realised, however, that what Louis described had anything to do with the slam phenomenon Laurent was so eager to show me (the two of them did not know each other).

Rue Oberkampf has, the last ten years, undergone a rapid gentrification and has become a street full of nightlife. On weekend nights, particularly warm ones like this, the narrow pavement swarms with people. However, there are still non-gentrified bars around, such as the place we were going. A middle-aged woman, zombie-like and drunk, swirled out of the bar just as we arrived. The atmosphere was strikingly different from the cultural café we had just visited. An East Asian-looking man was performing at the back of the small and narrow locale when we entered. He shouted. I caught something about politics and belonging, immigration, discrimination and the widely criticised, ironhanded Interior Minister Sarkozy. The same themes had been recurrent in the performances in the other bar as well, but as Jean pointed out, this was far angrier, far more aggressive.

The poet stumbled through the narrow, packed bar after his performance, not because he was drunk or stoned, I think, but as part of his theatrical performances. Later, I learnt that he was trained in experimental theatre. His name is Ucoc, and he will have a leading role in Chapter 10.

It was summer and the bar was overcrowded. It was at least as comfortable to hang around on the pavement outside, and people were moving in and out all the time. Laurent had finally met up with his friend – a young, blond boy in his early twenties, and he introduced him with the Polish name Yanek. At our request, Yanek performed the text for us, there on the pavement, as we had been too late to hear him both at *La Milonga* and here at *Plex Y Glass*. I have to admit I did not get the *jeux de mots* (“puns”) in his text, but I understood that he as well talked about his background as son of migrants, in this case from Poland. Yanek said that slamming meant everything to him now; many evenings a week he would travel from one performance to the next. He had come from Lille, (a mining city in northern France with a large influx of polish labour migrants some generations ago) some months earlier. Later, I heard him and another young *slammeur* slam about their town up north.

Who did not have foreign origins in this account? The proprietors of *La Milonga* are a Peruvian-German couple. *Le patron* at the bar in Rue Oberkampf is Tunisian, while

the two other persons working behind the bar are white and black. At the next place we moved on to, the patron was of North African origin as well. Jean's father is a Hungarian immigrant (while he describes his stepmother's side as *Pétainistes* – the French quislings during the Vichy government – and Le Pen-voters). Laurent is half Belgian, half French (but his surname is Spanish, and his biological paternal grandfather is un-known, probably North African according to him and judging from his dark complexion). Henri, my other acquaintance at this bar, was of West African origins, but born in France – his childhood friend who would come along with us afterwards was half Antillaise. Yanek's friend, who also would join us, had one parent from the Balkans.

How does one treat and describe these foreign origins? I quickly started asking myself. How important are they, and in which ways? I will try to give a preliminary answer. Let us start with Yanek. The name Yanek appeared to be the Polish equivalent of the poet's real name, Jean. His parents had chosen the French version, which the young man seemingly had wanted to reverse. Yanek or Jean seemed to have disappeared from the slam scene when I intensified my fieldwork there half a year later, so I never explored this further. The other young man from Lille, Bissao he called himself, was adopted from Korea, and he illustrated for me the relationship most Parisian slammers have with "ethnic background". On one occasion, Bissao, I and some others were discussing what makes a text poetic. He started talking with clear diction and a voice full of sensitivity, in metaphors and imagery, of being an adopted child. It was clear, I believe, that I took him seriously, but then he broke out in laughter and said it was just "stupid crap". I realised that what he had presented to me, was a mockery of a stereotype, what many people *expected* to hear from him. These issues will be explored further in Chapter 9, where I compare French slam with the concern with identity and identity politics in US-American slam, and in Chapter 10 where I claim that Parisian slam practice illustrates an understanding of the human being as universal *and* different.

The winding streets of Belleville and Ménilmontant

It was two o'clock and the bar was about to close, but the evening was obviously not yet over for us. Jean had gone home a while ago as he had to study the day after, and Henri started the one-hour long (night) bus ride to the banlieue where he lived. Six others;

Yanek, his friend, Henri's friend, and one other person, in addition to Laurent and I, started moving rather disorganised across Place de Ménilmontant and up Rue de Ménilmontant. I did not know where we were going, when Yanek received a text message about another place. I knew the area very well as I had lived just up the hill the first two months of my fieldwork.

At the crossroads, where my flat had been to the right, we turned left, and walked down the narrow, winding and cobblestoned street in the direction of Belleville. We were then right at the fuzzy boundary between the historically popular and rebellious Belleville and Ménilmontant, the latter slightly more "respectable" neighbourhood than the former. Here, in the old pre-Haussmannian Paris, the streets are narrow, the buildings from two to five stories high, predominantly from the same époque and slightly dilapidated, and there is more street art here than anywhere else I have been in Paris. I had already found the area picturesque, and the view that met us when we came down to the small crossroads could have been taken from a classical Parisian film: Accordion music streamed from the bistro at the corner, and through the large windows with bright red window frames we could see people dancing. A few posters hang on the windows, announcing theatre performances that apparently also take place in this bistro and neighbourhood theatre (and later they also started to stage slam sessions and concerts with poets from the slam scene), and for mobilisation against the new immigration law termed "disposable immigration" by its opponents. The bar was so packed that it seemed like the whole place was bulging and moving.

We tried to enter after hanging outside for a while, but the door was locked and we had to wait for someone to come and open it. The little band was perhaps Roma, and the music was at least Balkan brass. Quite a few people were dancing, in between all the others, even though there was hardly any space for moving. Just after we had entered the bar and the barman had closed the door again, we saw that a police car stop outside and two policemen came to see what was going on. No one opened this time, and not many seemed to care. We forgot about it and continued talking when suddenly a new car stopped. It took Laurent no time to say that that was the BAC (a police force who usually works in civilian clothes and with unmarked police cars. They intervene in "sensitive

milieus, particularly the council housing estates”⁴¹). Two white, square men with short blond hair and ear-mounted radio communication devices exited the front seats and came over first. In the back seat were two South Asian looking men with a little longer hair, but with even more trained bodies. There was some talking going on outside of the bar, with the barman who apparently also was the owner. Laurent said that now they will say that the bar is closed and we must get out of here within 30 minutes. That was precisely what happened. The owner entered, hit a gong and said the bar was closing. Laurent said loudly; “the BACs?” “Yes,” the owner replied.

We had just left the bar when the police came back, this time it was not the BACs, but a police car with the National Police in uniforms. So, contrary to what the police presence tried to achieve, like almost all of the other guests who had been on their way home, we stayed behind outside to see what was going to happen.⁴² The policeman who kept guard by the door while one of his colleagues was inside talking to the staff, was young and of North African origin from the banlieue outside Lyon. Laurent and I struck up a conversation with him. It was friendly, for the most part we asked questions and he answered. He told us that he had a microphone attached so everything the three of us said was being recorded.⁴³ He said he had worked in the suburbs before, but that had been far more difficult since it was impossible to talk to the youth there.

Arabic in the streets of Paris

After Laurent had helped Yanek and his friend with a taxi (often taxi drivers do not stop for two young men, but he stopped for Laurent and me, a man and a woman who were

⁴¹ Source: French Wikipedia: Brigade Anti-Criminalité (accessed 2.09.2011)

⁴² This is a mild version of what I experienced in the public area Vieux Port in Marseilles – ruled by the ruling right party UMP – when France reached the final in the football world championship. Twenty minutes after the unexpected victory, while there were still many thousands of people, including families with small children, celebrating in the Vieux Port, the CRS police force, heavily clad in combat uniforms, with shields and helmets, decided to try to empty the square with force and teargas. This is common knowledge in France, but I learnt it during the anti-CPE demonstrations, where all police in uniform stayed hidden behind corners in order not to create trouble. The CRS is like a red rag to a bull for many youth. In the Vieux Port, the result was that many, including many of the families, were prevented from going home for several hours as they were held back by lines of riot police. “Today, the CRS are more and more used for security missions (enforcement to the police stations) in the so-called “difficult” suburbs, and during football matches”. Source French Wikipedia: CRS (accessed 20.11.2007).

⁴³ Laurent joked and said; “so what if I say down with your boss, Monsieur Sarkozy?”. We agreed that the purpose was rather to keep an eye on the policeman and avoid that he for instance was disrespectful and said “tu” instead of “vous” to dark skinned youth, a sign of disrespect and humiliation which is a recurrent problem, particularly in the banlieues.

about ten years older), the two of us spent the rest of the night wandering around East Paris. The night had been full of strange incidences, and one of the last ones came when Laurent suddenly started speaking Arabic to an aggressive drunk homeless person (not necessarily of Arab origin) who would not leave me alone. Laurent did not know more than a few words, but together with an (utterly fake) Arab accent and a “*tête d’Arabe*” (“looks of an Arab”), as he put it, this was obviously something he found useful in tense situations in the street. Not long after, we met another (apparently white) man who spoke in the same way when asking us for some tobacco. The other white man had been sitting together with some undocumented immigrants (I thought they were homeless people, but Laurent said *sans-papiers*), and got up to ask us for something. Laurent indicated to me that we should continue walking slowly,⁴⁴ as it took the person some time to formulate his question. Both were clearly native French speakers, but for some reason the man said a few greetings in Arab to which Laurent responded in the same mock Arabic way, before the man continued with his real question. The reason for this use of Arabic is difficult to know (and it was impossible to get a straight answer from Laurent), but it clearly creates some kind of bond, as it perhaps allows you to show that you are an insider.⁴⁵ (I will come back to the mixing of foreign languages with French in Chapter 10 and 11).

It was very late and there was not much else to do than wait for the first metro to take Laurent up north, behind the Sacre Coeur, where he lived. We sat on a bench at the middle part of the boulevard not far away from where I lived, watching the fruit and

⁴⁴ Laurent spends a lot of time outside at night and precautions come handy. Late one night when we were sitting by Canal d’Ourcq, a not very safe place at that time of the day, I noticed how attentive he was, yet without showing any anxiousness, - in accordance with the before-mentioned rule of “show no fear”. I noticed that he nonchalantly had been following with his eyes a group of youngsters who had been hanging around in the area for a while. When they came by to ask us for cigarettes and the time, Laurent let them serve themselves with rolling tobacco, but did not take out his mobile to tell them the time – as he said to me afterwards; “amongst them they would have at least eight mobiles, why would they ask for the time...?” It was clearly a trap, but when we did not fall into it, the kids left us alone. Gangs like that are notoriously known – probably rightly, I had already experienced personally – for stealing mobiles and the like.

⁴⁵ Once I was in small fast food shop with Dgiz (a slammer I will introduce later), the employees started speaking to him in Arabic, although it was clear that the two of them knew French very well – probably because he looks like he is of North African origin. Dgiz knows as little Arabic as Laurent, but he apparently felt obliged to reply curtly with a few words. The usage of Arabic apparently meant different things in the two situations, as Laurent used it to somehow protect us. I am not really sure what the fast food clerk wanted from Dgiz. I am quite sure, however, that it had symbolic meaning in terms of drawing inclusive – or exclusive? – boundaries.

vegetable sellers put up their market stalls in the twilight before the Saturday market. It was nine hours since I had watched the fruit and vegetable sellers finish taking down their stalls in Montreuil. It had been a very long night.

I continued to go to slam sessions in this easygoing and organic manner with Laurent, and sometimes Jean, for the rest of the summer. It is no doubt thanks to Laurent that my fieldwork finally found its clear direction. However, the following winter, when I returned to Paris after a fieldwork break, I entered a phase of deep play in the milieu, a role uneasily reconciled with going to slam as a social event, as well as with Laurent's happy-go-lucky and mobile-directed way of organising his evenings. But my initial friends and I continued to discuss slam, politics and life in general weekly almost throughout my stay.

Chapter 3 – Methodological Introduction

Introduction

On the one hand, there are the sensations, the emotions, the experiences; the constant development of oneself as a human being under shifting circumstances paralleled by the development of a personal as well as an academic understanding. On the other hand, there is the aim to provide the best account possible: There is also the validity of my ethnography, the reliability of the explanations I provide and the applicability of my claims (Stewart 1998). In the Ethnographic Introduction, I tried to convey glimpses of the fleeting poetics of life in the field, in this chapter I will try to nail down the process of *Verstehen*/insights into a traceable methodology. Why do I write the things I write, and on what grounds?

As a researcher describing reality, I contribute to how people perceive that reality, if not my work would be in vain. Like in good slammer, sincerity of the practitioner and truthfulness in the writing characterise good anthropology. But unlike in slam, which is art when it works, the criteria of evaluation in social science are not aesthetic, they cannot be *felt* (at least not only felt). Anthropological knowledge production is inductive, in the sense that general statements about humans and their societies emerge out of detailed descriptions of particular events (Mitchell 2010: 2). I am not as bold as Donna Haraway who states that “my examples *are* my theories [...M]y theories are not abstractions, if anything, they are redescrptions” (Haraway 2000: 108, italics in original). Nevertheless, my aim is to provide sufficient context for the explanations to spring out of the descriptions. In order for the reader to evaluate to what extent I have done my very best to approach the “real” world in these descriptions, in this Methodological Introduction I outline my steps towards the finished thesis.

Truth, the real world and validity, objectivity and generalisation

To guide the reader through the methodological skeleton of this thesis, I make use of *The Ethnographer's Method*, a dense epistemological toolbox (Stewart 1998). In order to establish whether a particular ethnography is good work or not – i.e. coming as close to the truth about the “real” world as possible (1998: 12-14) – Alex Stewart applies three traditional epistemological criteria to the particular working conditions of the anthropological research situation. The questions we should ask ourselves (both as readers and writers) concern the “verisimilitude [accuracy, truthfulness] of depiction”, the possibility for objectivity or rather “transcendence of perspectives” of the researcher, and perspicacity or “the capacity to produce applicable insights” (1998: 47). However, before I translate these questions into my own work, I will establish the meaning of two central concepts: “Truth” and “real world”.

According to Stewart, as communication is possible, there cannot be multiple realities, but

multiple representations [of reality], each based on the limited purchase that one mind can have upon truth about reality. They have an epistemic, not an ontological, status. (Stewart 1998: 14)

That the representations have an epistemic and not an ontological status means that they do not have separate existences as different entities, but they exist as different approaches to the one entity of reality. Stewart defines truth as “a mode of epistemic evaluation, and the outcome of that evaluation. It is what is right to believe, based upon our epistemic values” (1998: 14). Stewart stresses that he is concerned about research method and within that domain; the epistemic values concern the values of science. There also exists other legitimate values and other measurements of truth, also valid in ethnography (1998: 14). In the discussion of *poiesis* in the Chapter 1, “Poetically man dwells”, I referred to Heidegger who saw the creative force as being able to unconceal or reveal truth. I will return to the kind of truth about human existence unconcealed and brought forth by *poiesis* at numerous occasions later in this thesis. Explaining the truth about human

conditions approached by research method on the other hand, is my immediate task. Stewart defines this truth as “what is right to believe, provisionally and critically, based upon our best means of understanding the reality of the subject at hand” (Hunt 1990 in Stewart 1998: 14).

What then is “reality” or the “real world”? In the article “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” Donna Haraway, describes the “world encountered in knowledge projects [as] an active entity” (1988: 593). She suggests to “revision” – see from a new perspective, perhaps – “the world as coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (1988: 596). An object of knowledge (with)in this active entity of a world is also an “active, meaning-generating part of apparatus of bodily production” and the “boundaries materialize in social interaction” (1988: 595, italics removed). By an “apparatus of bodily production,” Haraway perceives of the researcher as embodied and positioned in “dimensions of mental and physical space we hardly know how to name” (1988: 582). I will return to shortly the boundaries appearing through social interaction and “mapping practices” (1988: 595) around the objects of knowledge.

Truth about the real world is therefore approachable through research method – as well as *poiesis*. Truth is provisional, but still “based upon our best means of understanding,” and the real world must be engaged through “conversation”. The means of understanding and the kinds of “conversation” I have engaged in, are the subject of the methods section of this chapter. I will now return to the questions concerning the descriptive truthfulness, the objectivity, or “transcendence of perspective” and the applicability (generalisability) central to Stewart’s methodology.

Truthfulness of depiction

Truthfulness of depiction concerns the descriptive accuracy in relation to reality, as far as I understand Stewart. These descriptions are ideally the basis for explanations, theories and even general statements about human beings and their societies. I will first sum up the major descriptions in this thesis, before I return to Stewart’s suggestions.

Chapter 5 consists predominantly of descriptions of various aspects of the environment of North-East Paris. Chapter 6 is also mostly descriptive as I describe a

handful of slam venues in the same areas and one particular slam session. In Chapter 7, I try to map out and depict the native understanding of slam as therapy. In Chapter 8, I describe the work – craftsmanship (*techne*) and creative force (*poiesis*) – of the artists partly in their own words, but I also venture further away from native understandings and propose a theory of slam as ritual. In Chapter 9, I start my exploration of the connection between slam and the wider French society as I claim that slam can be read as a comment on a national crisis: What does slam say about France and what is French about slam? Furthermore, what resolutions do slam suggest to the crisis? Here, I also describe and explore Parisian slam through comparison with slam poetry in the United States of America (based on two studies, thus secondary sources). In Chapter 10, I build on the native understanding of slam as creating relations between people. Here, I take as a point of departure a transformative confrontation with a stereotype, and I bring in some comparative material on how relations between people are created. Through describing a handful of different slammers and quoting poems that somehow relate to belonging in France or what France is, I explore what the relations created in or through slam consist of: What kind of perceptions of human beings and community do they contain? How do the relations created affect people attending sessions? What do the relations and their content express about the wider French community? In Chapter 11, I describe meanings of belonging, equality and Frenchness attached to the past in the present, from the personal perspective of a young man who in his teens discovered that he had Arabic ancestry. Furthermore, I revisit the first part of my fieldwork to explore major issues of the re-appropriation of French history.

The limits to the truthfulness in depiction (“veracity”, or “validity excluding external validity”⁴⁶ (1998:17)) can, according to Stewart, be divided into “limits to learning in the field” and “in the fieldworker” (1998: 19). Limits in the field are the size of the field and the possibilities of lies and deceptive fronts on part of the locals. The limitations in the researcher are possibilities of misunderstandings, premature interpretations and “‘the holistic fallacy’ of seeing nonexistent and overwrought connections” as well as personal

⁴⁶ Because anthropological knowledge production depends on the particular positioning of the researcher within the particular context.

and role constraints limiting the access to the field (1998:19). He suggests the following coping strategies (1998: 20-28):

- 1) Prolonged fieldwork for a deeper understanding of the local context (p. 20.)
- 2) Seek out reorienting or disconfirming observations (p. 21)
- 3) Employ good participative role relationships (p. 22)
- 4) Be attentive to speech and interactional contexts (p. 26)
- 5) Employ multiple modes of data collection (p. 28)

There are more than 65 million people living in France, almost 12 million in the Parisian region (Île-de-France), and some hundreds of thousands in the neighbourhoods of Belleville and Ménilmontant. The slam scene consists of dozens of venues and several hundred people. What are the limitations in the field and in the fieldworker for describing as truthfully as possible? I do not make claims to say something about all Frenchmen, the whole of Northeast Paris, or even the whole of the slam milieu, not even of the particular “fungal thread” which is my focus. Rather, I describe and explain prominent, but not exclusive, processes, features, values and understandings present in French society, the particular neighbourhoods and the slam venues. I will now go through Stewart’s list of remedies a bit hotchpotch, to see to what extent I have coped with the shortcomings in field and fieldworker.

I spent about 16 months in the field, from the riots in the suburbs in the autumn 2005 until shortly after the election of President Sarkozy in the summer 2007. I lived four different places: in a rapidly gentrifying street in Ménilmontant (20th arr.), a quiet working-class area in Charonne (11th arr.), right at Place de la République (10th arr.) and in buzzing Rue du Faubourg du Temple (also 10th arr.), bordering Belleville.⁴⁷ Before the fieldwork, I lived in central Le Marais (4th arr.), which provided some comparative material concerning the use of public space.

The fieldwork divided itself roughly into three phases, or stages, which can broadly be described as three different modes of data collection. All, somehow,

⁴⁷ I lived, unfortunately, either alone or with foreigners who lived quite detached from the locality, e.g. not using the local cafés or the street market.

corresponded to the original plan of exploring the dialectics between belonging and *vivre ensemble* in the Republic. First, a bewildered stage starting with the *banlieue* riots in October-November 2005 and ending in the aftermath of the protests against the reform of the labour market (*CPE*) in April 2006. During this period, I searched high and low for a site where the belonging-community connection could be studied through the lens of the emotions and issues of the two recent outbreaks of social unrest. I spent a lot of time in the streets and public places as I observed and participated in demonstrations, political meetings and cultural events. In addition, I followed a variety of news events via radio, television, newspapers and sites like Indymedia. The broad search gave me much general insight into various forms of local political and community life, public concerns and discourses on relevant fields (colonialism, French history, the suburbs...). When finally one of my attempts at finding a suitable arena for participant observation succeeded – i.e. it satisfied my research interests *and* I attained a proper access and rapport – the knowledge of local political, social and cultural affairs that I had built up was crucial for my integrity as a (foreign) researcher.⁴⁸ Much of this background knowledge has also found its way into the thesis.

Was it spring catching on, making the locals as well as myself more open to new encounters or was the researcher finally ready? Whatever the reason, the big breakthrough came at the end of May. Two chance encounters at two of the numerous cultural events I had attended (one musical parade through the centre of Paris for AIDS solidarity and awareness and, one punk concert at a local cultural centre in support of the repression after the anti-CPE mobilisation) lead me in the direction of the slam phenomenon. One of them is Laurent, whom I described in Chapter 1; the other is Louis, whose story I will retell in the final chapter. I lost contact with the latter just before I went back to Norway in the autumn 2006.

For a little less than two months before the summer break and during two shorter visits in the autumn in 2006, I went to about a dozen slam sessions (which I recorded with my iPod). I had immediately realised that this phenomenon was as perfect as it gets

⁴⁸ In both my fieldworks I experienced how important it was to position oneself in relation to certain topics in order to be accepted and treated as worthy of talking to and hanging around with. A novice's *faut pas* often hailed in anthropological methodology as a way of observing taboos and boundaries in local life, can very rapidly close doors for any further contact in the maze of a large city.

for my research questions. In the beginning, however, I preferred to attend the sessions with my friend(s), as they did, and without presenting my research for the slammers. Like many others, we often arrived late as we went for dinner first and stayed outside too long during the breaks. However, as that is exactly how many enjoy the slam scene, particularly in the outgoing atmosphere of very hot summer nights, this “hanging out with friends” gave me an insight into the cultural “entertainment” aspect of the scene, and how my company, as non-participants, perceived slam, French society and the relations between the two. From January 2007, I started going alone to the sessions in order to concentrate more fully on what was going on at stage, but I continued to discuss slam, politics and life in general with my initial friends weekly almost throughout my stay.⁴⁹

The three stages of fieldwork gave me the opportunity to see various phenomena (banlieues, colonial history, politics, Sarkozy and the slam itself) from different angles. These include the media, discussions with various more or less chance encounters in the local environment as well as at all the different events I attended, (video material of) poetic interpretations, and to some extent the lived experiences I could get to know through encounters. This “quadrangulation” covers a vast array of relevant issues and their socio-political-geographical context, and I am quite certain that the result is a valid description of what really was, seen from my particular position in time and space.

From January until July, I attended an average of two sessions or shows/concerts a week (out of a choice of about five), and filmed most of them. It was also immensely interesting to follow their workshops in order to see more of the philosophies and practice driving the slammers⁵⁰. I went to numerous writing workshops with all together ten established slammers⁵¹ inside and outside Paris: among young and not so young people, retired people, mentally ill, hearing disabled, homeless, battered women and quite

⁴⁹ By an unspoken agreement both Laurent and I seemed to come to the conclusion that my role as a fieldworker would be better off alone, without having to straddle the role as company at the same time.

⁵⁰ Unfortunately, five interesting workshops hosted by reputable slammers in five suburbs in the Département of Seine-Saint-Denis (and paid for by the respective Municipalities) collided, as they were all scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, the time when the secular French Republican school has left vacant for religious or cultural education outside the state establishment.

⁵¹ Three women and seven men: I went regularly to Saint Denis and the workshop hosted by Grand Corps Malade and Fleur du Maroni, once to Bobigny and D’ de Kabal, once with Abd el Haq in north Paris, a couple of times with Ucoc in Montreuil, twice with Chantal Carbon (and Cat Mat) to two different workshops in institutions, several times with Dgiz to different events, once with RiM near Gard du Nord, and one with Tsunami.

ordinary people. I also followed the more or less improvised rehearsals for two concerts,⁵² which was instructive in order to see how the people involved interact as well as how creative encounters work. Towards the last month, I recorded unstructured interviews with about 20 slammers (7 women, 13 men). There were at least a handful⁵³ more slammers whom I had planned to interview on return trips, but circumstances (the birth of my child, the illness of my father and my own long sick-leave due to the need of a hip replacement) made that difficult to achieve.

I observed and participated in a variety of “interactional contexts” (Stewart 1998: 26) where I could observe speech and action: Among (a continuum of) friends and strangers at various slam sessions, in smaller groups of more intimate friends, and a few times amongst family. I also participated and observed people as professionals in workshops and concerts, in one-to-one conversations, and in interviews where the atmosphere automatically became more formal and professional. Although only a few of these settings were unrelated to slam, I consider the contextual background for interpretation to be sufficiently broad.

In addition to the schism in the milieu described in the introduction, there exist numerous extensively interconnected “bundles of lines of growth”. There is a large degree of interconnection, I realise when I try to describe my way into the various bundles, as most people know each other and collaborations start, end and overlap. By chance, interests and not least personal affinity nevertheless, I became more involved with a couple of persons and bundles than with others. I discovered slam at a session with Tsunami, and in the beginning, I followed his work closely. After a few weeks at different kinds of sessions and one workshop, I did not speak much to him again before I interviewed him at the end of my stay. I met Ucoc, however, at Tsunami’s sessions, and we stayed in close contact for the rest of my stay. Together with Dgiz, Ucoc is the person

⁵² One concert in an ongoing collaboration initiated by the jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Luis Schlavis where Dgiz and several other musicians this time worked with a poet and a singer from Morocco. And one concert where the slammers Ucoc, Gaspard, Bissao and some others who are not mentioned in this thesis performed together with a group of contemporary music musicians. Here, I also met the slammer Lorent for the first time.

⁵³ Among them are two women. One, I had seen perform and host at numerous occasions could have exposed a libertine aspect of slam which is absent from this thesis. She, however, avoided my attempts at interviewing her, either I presume – as a divorcee with three children with the hard work and little income slam provide – she did not have time, or more likely; she did not want to.

I knew the best. Through Ucoc, I was introduced to Chantal Carbon, Caroline Carl, Zéor and his girlfriend, Nancy (a brass band musician, whom became one of the few persons I knew well outside the slam milieu) and numerous others. Nancy was one of the first persons to strongly recommend Dgiz' session at *L'Atelier du Plateau* (described in detail in Chapter 6). After our first meeting, Dgiz and I spent a lot of time together. Although it is evident that the robustness of the slam milieu is independent from all its separate parts, this thesis would not have been the same without his generosity and wisdom. Among the many bundles – collaborations – Dgiz was involved with, I also knew from before Damien, Antoine (Tô) and Sandra.

By chance and circumstances (most likely because I already had my hands full with the connections I already had, which started to sprawl in all directions quickly) I did not get more than superficially involved with the network around the association 129H, which included Souleymane Diamanka who receives a prominent place in this thesis. I have seen him perform on several occasions and talked briefly to him, but I have not interviewed him (He was busy touring with his new album the last month of my stay when I organised the interviews). I also did not interview Hocine Ben, whose poetry also appears in Chapter 10. Three of the people I interviewed, I did not know well (Nada, Pilote le Hot and Katrin'D), and consequently the interviews turned out superficial, like anything I could have picked up in an interview in the media. The explanation is probably a combination of different reasons: lack of personal rapport and affiliation, lack of familiarity with their work and additionally stuttering French because I felt ill at ease.

If I had slightly skewed my attention in direction of other bundles,⁵⁴ I might have discovered some other nuances and heard some other stories. I would nevertheless claim that I know the milieu well enough to be certain that I would have found similar values and dynamics – towards individual therapy and dignity and community building on the basis of equality across diversity – together with artistic creativity, of course, behind the slam phenomenon also among a different selection of slammers. That slam is also much *more* than these central dynamics and values, is of course also true, not least because if

⁵⁴ As will become clear in Chapter 9, I think the dynamics alter more profoundly with competition, thus if I had shifted focus to the other branch altogether, my results would have been different. I have however been to a handful of sessions including a major championship in the “competitive” branch, and they never captured me to the same extent that my first – and many later – meeting with non-competitive slam.

not, it would not have been sufficiently diverse. This heterogeneity on all levels will permeate throughout the thesis.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was ill at ease with what I considered my insufficient command of French. However, that no one, including numerous people who had recently spent a year or so in English speaking countries, preferred to speak even the slightest bit of English to me, I choose to see as approval of my proficiency in French. Most of the protagonists in this thesis are people I met on numerous occasions and we often discussed the same issues, which gave me opportunities to deepen and develop nuanced understandings. I also use much written and recorded material.

A note on the use of video

I quickly realised that jotting down notes was insufficient to capture what went on at slam sessions. Taking notes interfered with the concentration as well as the experience, and there was no way the full sensuous impact could be jotted down in a few lines. Neither were audio recordings sufficient to capture the performances, so I therefore decided to purchase a video camera.

However tedious and time-consuming the editing work has been, it has been immensely helpful to be able to study in detail the performers and performances after the event. In addition to re-listening to hard-to-understand argotic or difficult French and reliving at least glimpses of the atmosphere, I have counted sociological categories, studied ways of dressing, facial expressions and gesticulations and interaction. A positive side-effect of filming, was that many were interested to have clips of themselves, and my Youtube site (only with videos people asked me to put there) has become very popular and many slammers have embed my videos on their own Myspace and Facebook sites.

There is however no doubt that both filming and editing consumed enormous amounts of time as well as attention, which could have been directed elsewhere. The concerns over handling the camera at the sessions themselves, made me less perceptive of what went on elsewhere in the locale. People are generally not talking much, but I would have liked to see more of the composition of the audience, who was sitting together, facial expressions, and the like.

I always introduced myself to the presenter and asked for the permission to film, and the presenter often chose to inform the audience about my work. Only once did one person refuse to be filmed, and after that, the presenters made an extra effort to explain that the videos were just for personal use in a research project. As I have deep respect for people's right to privacy and never wanted to interfere with the setting to the extent of asking everybody present to let me film them, I only on very rare occasions film the audience (as when Ucoc wandered into the locale). Although I lack more information on the audience and their reactions, I cannot say I regret this choice in hindsight, as I was very conscious of not turning my lens in the direction of the audience.

As I am not sure I would have filmed as much as I did if I were to do it again, I will explain briefly why I made this choice and its consequences: In 2006, the slammer Grand Corps Malade (GCM) sold 600 000 copies of his debut record. For a while, journalists dropped by on slam sessions, and I heard numerous slammers criticise them for their quick and detached appearance, shallow understanding and misrepresentations. More importantly in this respect, GCM's success and the interest journalists and record companies granted the scene, attracted certain participants whom many of the old-timers regarded as alien and indeed destructive to the ethos of slam. Instead of searching for sincerity and one's own voice, they try to copy a success formula (according to e.g. Damien and Tô), and instead of contributing to the community, they come to promote themselves (e.g. Tsunami, Chantal Carbon). – I judged that flashing my video camera around too much, regardless its small size, would just contribute to this development. I therefore just held it quietly on my lap or on the table in front of me. I was also told that some hosts did not appreciate the cameras around the stage. I never heard that personally, but such remarks strengthened my conviction that the video had to be used circumspectly.

I felt somehow that the camera could interfere in the immediacy of slam. Although a certain ego and narcissistic element are necessary in order to be willing to face an audience, there is a strong ethos of humility on behalf of self and respect for the time and space of others (a paradox and duality well recognised among slammers themselves), what could be called a sense of deep-seated direct democracy. The immediacy of the interaction and the experience of humility, respect and dignity is something that is very different from the one-way, projected or intermediated experiences

people can have alone in front of their television sets. The resentment of “staying alone in front of the telly” is widespread in the slam milieu and something I discovered quickly. Later, in my analysis, I related this attitude to the implicit similarities between slam and the Situationists’ critique of the society of the spectacle.

Something else I did in order to blend in and earn my respect was to put the camera down and clap after every performance. As I will show, there is a strong emphasis on applause and encouragement, and I wanted to participate in that. Technically, that made a break between every performance, which appeared to be a great advantage when working with the clips afterwards. I see, however, that I have lost access to much additional information that way. For instance, a couple of the slammers (Bissao and Lorent (not to be confused with “Laurent”)) had worked with film before, and they sometimes borrowed by camera. The clip Lorent made of my slam at L’Atelier du Plateau follows me all the way into the audience, until I sit down beside him after finishing. As a skilled cameraperson, he moves the focus back to Dgiz to capture his satisfied and happy smile before sitting down after giving me the drink voucher (“one performance, a drink on the house”, see Chapter 6), as well as my own smile, exalted, relieved and a bit amazed (I will come back to the meaning of this incident shortly). In comparison with the significant emotions Lorent captured, much of my own filming is flat. My conclusion is thus that filming is clearly an aesthetic form in the sense that it can extend the visual sense, however the camera is a part of “the apparatus of bodily production” that demands skill. I have gained an enormous amount of information that I could not have acquired any other way from watching and scrutinising the videos, but had I known the skills, the result could have reached far deeper into the fullness of relations created in slam.

A few times I tried not to film, in order to be more observant of what happened around me, but then someone would declaim a new and interesting text or something else pertinent would happen, and I would regret not having filmed it. For example, I did not film the first bit of Marie-Françoise’s text on the session described in Chapter 6, as I had already filmed it elsewhere. As will become clear in that and Chapter 10, however, the performance was unique and highly significant. To conclude, fieldwork, just like all stages of writing up (Fabian 2010), consists of a myriad of smaller and bigger choices,

and the choices I made concerning filming and focusing in the course of the action during the sessions were perhaps not the best ones.

Transcendence of perspectives

I have now discussed the length and to some extent width of my fieldwork and the multiple modes of data collection. I will, before I delve deeper into the remaining questions concerning the ground for truthfulness of depiction, introduce Stewart's next epistemic value on establishing the "objectivity" or the context of research: To what extent is the context and the positionality – thus the relationship between the researcher and her object of knowledge – sufficiently specified? Put differently, what are the possibilities for "transcendence of perspectives"? (1998: 17).

Has the research basis – including the data – been specified sufficiently that readers could make their own informed judgements about the interpretation and findings that are presented? (Stewart 1998: 30)

Haraway describes objectivity as "about particular and specific embodiment" (1988: 582), and writes that "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (1988: 583). To cope with this problematic, Stewart suggests accounting for the learning process either through a reflexive writing style or by Sanjek's (1990) notion of the "trail of the ethnographer's path" (Stewart 1998: 33-34). This "path" is connected to the participative "role relationships" available to the researcher. However, while roles "provide *potential* for sets of interactions; the ethnographer's path is the set of actual interactions as this potential has been *realized*" (1998:34, italics in original).

Role-involvement in the field and ethnographer's path

In order to clarify what arenas and what kind of knowledge the researcher might or might not have had access to, Stewart distinguishes between different depths of role involvement with the help of Adler and Adler's typology of peripheral, active and complete member researcher roles (Stewart 1998: 22ff). As will become clear, I have been involved in the slam milieu on all the scales of this typology. Initially, when I went

together with Laurent (and sometimes Jean) I was in the periphery, but the last six months I was for the most part active, sometimes bordering on becoming a complete member, as slam is an “open mafia”, “an every-ramifying bundle of lines of growth” (Ingold 2008: 1807).

The ethnographer’s path should, according to Stewart provide information on “the extent and type of partisanship on the part of the author,” “the researcher’s manner of, and success in, gaining the trust of multiple subgroups” and the “success in attaining a deep and privileged access within at least some social units” (1998: 36, italics omitted). It should also assess to what extent the study represents a “strategic coverage of the system” and “the range of variation in the perspectives that were witnessed” (1998: 35, italics omitted).

There are many spheres in Parisian society where a researcher can have various levels of involvement. Generally, I would say that the neighbourhoods where I lived were easy to integrate into, compared for instance to Le Marais in the picturesque centre of the city where I lived some years ago. There, so many tourists, short-term visitors and wanderers pass through that the local, for the most part tightly-knit Jewish, population apparently cannot be bothered with new faces. In northeast Paris, if one dresses down and takes one’s time in local shops, cafés and public places, one is quickly greeted as a resident. There is also a striking correspondence between the slam milieu and the local area (see Chapter 5): The openness to newcomers of most shades and stocks (but they’d better not look too posh, I’d guess). Life outdoors in the streets however rarely does more to you than making you feel welcome, which is a good beginning.

Slam, on the other hand, can very quickly provide you with a community. It was striking how fast things started to happen after I introduced myself in January 2007, and as Paul Cash also suggests in the earlier quote, I see this rapid integration as indicative of the openness and inclusiveness of the milieu. On the restrictive side, I found French gender relations, apparently giving me – an exotic newcomer “who knew everyone” – the role of trophy to many men and competitor to many women. I find French gender relations to be almost exclusively based on – or centred around or springing from – sexuality, on flirt and seduction, to an extent I am not used to from my native society. As I mentioned, my ability to express myself in French also hampered me. I do not however

think that these limitations have made a big difference. I made more than enough friends and acquaintances to gain an nuanced understanding of slam and its significance. I heard critical remarks of style and attitude of other slammers and of the milieu, I heard different views and personal stories. I saw the home and living conditions of slammers, and I got a sense of the private life with some partners and children (very few had ordinary daytime jobs). I would deem I have been involved in sufficient sides of the life of many to get a clear picture of what is at stake for people “behind the scenes”, and to understand what they do in public at the slam sessions.

Concerning critical remarks I now turn to what Stewart calls a “strategic coverage of the system” and “the range of variation in perspectives” (1998: 35). A fundamental aspect of Parisian slam, as I will argue in Chapter 6 and onwards, is the overwhelming heterogeneity of backgrounds and life trajectories, of perspectives and stories, and of social positions and – irrespectively – quality and proficiency. There are however critical voices that claim that not everybody can speak his or her mind. One person estimated that 20% of the slam-goers vote Sarkozy, but did not dare to speak their mind at the sessions. I have no reason to believe that he is right about the relatively high percentage. The second point, however, that praise for the then Interior Minister running for presidency would not be well received, I deem true. It is apparent that the slam scene is politically independent but left- or anarchist leaning, however importantly without any labels.

I will cite a couple of comments I have heard in order not to create a false homogeneity of opinions in the milieu. The views have not found their way into the analysis because I have not found much, if any, basis for them in the numerous sessions I have attended (more than 50) and filmed (around 40). The question that can be raised (but which I will not answer) is, thus, have they heard significantly other things than I have, or do they interpret things differently? I have chosen to anonymise the comments, first because they are controversial, second because it does not really matter who said them. The important fact is that the viewpoints exist and that they can be expressed to a person one does not necessarily know very well: One person said to me that he preferred “Arab” slammers rather than “Blacks” since Blacks only talked about slavery while the former were more varied. To any extent, I suppose he means Caribbean (Antillaise) Blacks, as “African Blacks” do not have much issue with slavery in general in France. Another

person said he could not stand texts on “colonialism”, “the bad Whites” and racism, apparently because there were too many of them. “Earlier,” he complained, “there were a lot of texts about sex (*cul*). Now it is banlieues.” He then made a joke about if you combine the two you would probably get texts about rape, but this he did not want me to cite him on. His criticism went in the direction of “Arabs” rather than “Blacks”.

Another related issue concerns the freedom as well as *transformative* freedom from taxonomic constraints of stereotypes and racism that exist in wider society I claim that slam space is capable of providing. Judging from the above comments, this freedom is thus not unanimous but far more prominent at the slam sessions than most other places in France. Correspondingly, I claim that slam is capable of creating conceptualisations, understandings and experiences of a universal human of difference. Quite contrary to my claim, I heard a seemingly open, tolerant and talented slammer deem Souleymane Diamanka, whose poetry I base much of this claim on, “too African” as he makes too much use of “a certain tradition while life is lacking. [...] It’s always the same, and one phrase that speaks for all ‘I’m the grandson of...’”. I found the criticism a bit surprising as most slammers have certain themes they approach more often than others (including the person who said this). Furthermore, Souleymane, like other good slammers, has several other themes in addition to traces of African ancestry. I therefore interpret the comment in two possible ways; one, Souleymane is perhaps the second most successful slammer in France, after Grand Corps Malade, and with more success comes more criticism in the milieu. Second, the universal Republican tradition that has made even the smallest element of “foreign ethnic belonging” an automatic exclusion from universal human and belonging to the Republic, still has a hold even in this heterogeneous and open-minded slam milieu.⁵⁵

I claim that in slam “the players are mere men and women”, and sincerity and truthfulness in performance are fundamental dynamics and basic values. This also extends to the fieldworker, and can perhaps partly explain why I was met with a demand that I participated. In most workshops I took part, the host expected me to participate on the level with the others, and eventually I was expected to slam on stage. “Have you started to slam now?” I was frequently asked. My integrity in the milieu clearly depended

⁵⁵ I return to the issue of stereotypes and lesser freedom, in the theoretical introduction in Chapter 7.

on finally doing it. Furthermore, I realised immediately afterwards there were a number of things I could never have learnt about slam without having tried it myself. First, on an immediate experiential level, I noticed that the anxiety I felt while waiting for my name to be called up to the stage was detrimental to my ability to listen (Marie-Françoise says something similar in Chapter 9). Thus, I learnt that there is a large portion of the audience who are only shallowly following what happens on stage, as the main focus of their attention is turned inwards. (As I argue in Chapter 9, to be entertained by witty texts and poignant performances is not the main objective of Parisian slam). Finally, to perform automatically initiated me into the community of slammers, also among people whom I had never talked to before.⁵⁶

The particular and specific embodiment and the darker arts of fieldwork

Beyond the more apparent positionality of a politically and culturally interested, educated woman of Scandinavian origin in her mid thirties with quite varied life-experiences, it is, as Haraway writes, a challenge to name the “dimensions of mental and physical space” (1988: 582) where I was during fieldwork. What were the particular relationships between me the researcher and the “active, meaning-generating part of apparatus of bodily production” that Haraway calls the objects of knowledge (1988: 595)? Central to these dimensions and relationships I “hardly know how to name” (Haraway 1988: 582) is the phenomenon known as “going native” captured exquisitely in Kirsten Hastrup’s epistemological enquiry *A Passage to Anthropology* (1995). I reread it just a few weeks within my return from fieldwork. It reverberated so strongly with my recent field experiences that it became a kind of wakeup-call. She starts by describing how she suffered – by the weather and work conditions, and the “not uncommon problems of loneliness, of sexual assaults, loss of identity” – during her fieldwork in Iceland.

⁵⁶ E.g. the old-timer Paul Cash, whom I quoted in the Introduction, started talking to me in a way that made me feel very included – about how amazed he had been when he discovered the far northern town of Tromsø, all scattered around on mountainous islands within fjords, on Google Earth and how interesting it was to hear the Norwegian language – and not long afterwards I did a quite instructive interview with him, thanks for a large part to his knowledge of me through my slam.

In spite of all this, one of my greatest shocks in the field was to be reminded of my own world. Towards the end of my first year-long stay in Iceland, when I lived and worked in a fishing village in pitch-dark and ice-cold winter, and where I had for some time felt completely cut off from the rest of the world, I once received six letters addressed to Kirsten Hastrup. [...] That really got me down, and I knew instantly that I would never, ever go back to that world which had nothing to do with me. I was infuriated that people assumed that they knew who I was. They did not, obviously. I was Kristín á Gimli, worked as a fish-woman, smelled of fish, and shared my incredibly shabby house with three young and wild fishermen. That was who I wanted to be, I decided, and threw the letters into a heap of junk.

They remained there, but as readers will have guessed, I myself returned – at least partly – to the world I had left. In that world I write articles on the fishermen’s violence and the god-forsaken village.

Experience has become memory, and the relics are embellished so as to pass for anthropology. (Hastrup 1995: 14-15)

It should be said that it was usually – but not always – more physically agreeable to be in Paris than an Icelandic fishing village, but the harshness of Hastrup’s fieldwork makes her “going native” particularly striking. I have gone native to the extent that I believed I was going to move and settle in both London and Paris, but the Parisian experience was particularly strong because I had started to regain stable ground under my feet – existentially speaking – during my stay there. Before I approach that issue, I will try to explain how I believe “going native” impinges on “the active, meaning-generating part of apparatus of bodily production” (Haraway 1988: 595) that is my object of knowledge.

Fieldwork, particularly its darker arts of deception, betrayal, selfishness and particularly seduction, is eminently treated in Harry F. Wolcott’s *The Art of Fieldwork* (2005). Books on method was the only kind of science-related literature I read in Paris, and his turned out to be very helpful at a moment when I was verging on go native like Hastrup describes. Wolcott asks:

Is seduction one of our darker arts? As craftspeople, are we so crafty that others don't know when they are being seduced? (Wolcott 2005: 141)

And so crafty, I would add, that we even seduce ourselves, like Hastrup apparently did: I believed, like Hastrup, that I would not return "to that world which had nothing to do with me", and that is what I expressed to my friends and acquaintances in the field, as well. Wolcott's point is that anthropologists must learn to live with the elements of deception and betrayal which will always be involved when we as humans do research on other humans (1998: 146). In hindsight I feel that I was so good at being seductive in the role of Cecilia in Paris that I seduced myself as well. I am not sure to what extent my friends and acquaintances actually felt betrayed or deceived by me not staying or coming back or moving to Paris, as I said – and believed – I would, as the milieu is fluid and people come and go all the time. However, I am quite certain that I gained intimacy through this belief. To go native means in my case to become one with my object of knowledge for at least short periods of time.

Hastrup's point is not, like Wolcott's, of ethical consideration, but rather an epistemological one. The mode of seducing oneself into the life of the natives is very different from the mode of detaching oneself afterwards. Fieldwork demanded very different skills of me as an anthropologist – but foremost as a human being – than does sitting in front of my computer in the dry office air, surrounded by books and university life, resting my eyes on the gardens and villas of one of the more affluent areas of Oslo outside my office window.

Fieldwork is a diacritical in the anthropological practice. While it lasts, it is a radical experience of estrangement and relativism. Afterwards, it becomes memory and the backbone of objectivism. (Hastrup 1995: 14)

Afterwards, I detach myself from my object of knowledge – thus also from my Parisian self – and I try to objectivise it. What happened in Paris seems utterly obscure and impossible to name, but the significant question for Stewart (1998) is: Is it possible to transcend my particular perspectives, and is the context for my knowledge production

sufficiently spelled out in order to verify this? I think so, with the exception of the issue I come to now.

The vista of existential suffering

When I came to Paris, I had not yet recovered from a deep existential crisis concerning the issues of illness, death and aging (Several people who were dear to me died, and I realised that my father whom I have always been very close to, was seriously ill. He was later diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease). At the age of thirty-three – like surprisingly many in the history of existential issues – I realised that my existence was not eternal, so to speak. A particular poem, which I was reminded of in a dream, helped me to take the first steps out of several months of complete inertia about a month before I went to Paris. My boyfriend, and later husband, was writing a thesis on the Norwegian author and poet Jens Bjørneboe at the time, and we had spent a lot of time discussing what the author describes as “awareness of death” (*Dødsbevissthet*), to be able to *live* with the knowledge of death. The very vivid and symbolically loaded dream, inspired us to take the trip down to the little island Veieland, where Bjørneboe lived the last years of his life, before he killed himself, and visit his grave. The Sunday trip to the small, idyllic island in wonderful early autumn weather is a memory that stands out in a dark and difficult period, and the contemplation over the meaning of the poem was to become an important part of the process of learning to live with loss. To me the poem is about the ephemeral character of existence, and the beauty of accepting just that.⁵⁷ It was this poem I performed in French and Norwegian at two occasions during my fieldwork.

What I went through during my fieldwork and the time leading up to it, bears many similarities to a healing process many slammers have been through in terms of coming to grips and learning to live with their wounds and losses through the help of a community of sharing (Das 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Seremetakis 1991). In the chapters to come, I will discuss this process in more detail from an ethnographic point of view where

⁵⁷ Jeg stopper, ser meg tilbake/ Egentlig var det lite / Der seilier en rødmalt drake / Oppe blandt alt det hvite
// Vinden, vinden og snoren / Bærer ennu et stykke / Alt som er til på jorden / Alt hva naturen gav meg /
Frysende, vek av lykke / Gir jeg det atter fra meg
I stop and look back / It was really little / There, a red kite sails / Up, in all the white // The wind, the wind
and the thread / Carries still a while / Everything existing on earth / Everything which nature gave me /
Shivering, weak of happiness / I give it once more away

I show how many of those involved with slam give their wounds and pain a home in language.

That I had gone through the experiences I had, and that I was still searching for answers to my existential wandering, obviously made me receptive to grasp the core of such profound issues when Dgiz quite quickly told me about the aspect of therapy in slam. This occurred however eight months after I had discovered slam, and was not what I found in the phenomenon at the beginning (as I described in Part II). It took me several more years to realise that my experiences were *similar* (one important difference is that I did not write the poem myself) to the therapeutic experiences the slammers were talking about. With this “particular and specific embodiment” and “limited location and situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988: 582-3) spelled out, my specific vista should be sufficiently clear.

Ethics

Save from four people who are not included in this project as slammers (Laurent and Jean in the Introduction, and Louis and Henri in the final chapter), all the participants are presented with their proper names. There are several reasons for not using pseudonyms: Practically, the milieu is relatively small and all the members and their stories are singular and impossible to anonymise. Furthermore, I also use their poems which certainly should be credited correctly.

I deem it right also from a theoretical, not only methodological and ethical perspective, to keep the focus on their public persona, as I will claim that their quest concerns two aspects of *public* relationships. First, slam explicitly engages in a re-appropriation of bonds between people in a public space that is free of market logic and commercialisation. Second, many participants engage in a re-appropriation of a public status as dignified, full human beings. As I will come to shortly in the theoretical outline, the Algerian philosopher Sidi Mohammed Barkat (2005, undated) writes about the demonstrators in Paris at the 17 October 1961: “The French Muslims of Algeria” replied to the curfew that targeted them specifically by putting on their best clothes and going out in public to prove their worth as full human beings, with full citizenship rights. According to Barkat, it was the *publicness* of the act and its claim to *public* acceptance

that outraged the police to such levels of brutality, or savagery that they beat several hundred to death. The demonstrators no longer accepted their status as “bodies of exceptions”. I propose a similar interpretation for the slammers: Their quest is a *public* re-appropriation of dignity and full humanness. There are therefore certain stories, particularly concerning slam as therapy, which I will not go into detail about, mainly because they asked me not to write about it. At the same time I do not consider the exclusion of these details of a great ethnographic loss for the study as a whole.

Aspiration to produce insights that can be applied elsewhere

The extent to which insights can “travel” from the context where they are produced depends on the translatability of concepts. The task of specifying all the contingencies and implications of the findings starts at the level of concepts and taxonomy.

From experience near to experience distant concepts in coeval times

Stewart quotes Geertz in order to explain the process of generating transferable insights (Stewart 1998: 59).

[T]he ethnographer’s goal is “to grasp concepts which, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life”. (Geertz 1976 p. 224, quoted in Stewart 1998: 59)

Many of the concepts that appear in the experience-near descriptions in this thesis can also be termed experience-distant, as the theorists’ knowledge has seeped back into the population (Fagerlid 2005). That slam is therapy (*thérapie*), is not my discovery, but something I first heard from Dgiz the first time I met him. Slam as therapy, free speech (*libre parole*) and democracy, and that slam bringing together a diversity of people (*mixité*), involve thus both “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts. So are the concepts of “sincerity” (*sincérité*), “truth” (*vérité*) and “it’s real, it’s integrated in reality” (*c’est réel [...] c’est intégré dans une réalité*). The task at hand must be to get a

clear idea of what the concepts mean to the person using them and evaluate to what extent that meaning corresponds to the experience-distant one in the analysis. I hope I have succeeded in making these concepts “travel” and establish their general applicability in the chapters they are treated.

Certain other concepts are further away from the local experiences. In order to make explicit “the principles and practices of theoretical sampling” (Sanjek from Stewart 1998: 56), Stewart suggests a detailed documentation of

the categories of data and the major concepts used, and the outline of the process in which higher-order constructs were created. [...] Ethnographic analysis is an engagement of ideas and those segments of data that are sampled with these ideas in mind, and the inverse engagement [where ideas spring from “segments of data”, I presume]. (Stewart 1998: 57)

This brings me back to the points from Mitchell (2010) and Haraway (1988) in the beginning of this chapter, highlighting how tight the relationship must be between general statements and theories on the one hand and examples and descriptions of particular events on the other. Thus, when slammers speak directly or indirectly of equal treatment and the convivial atmosphere, I make clear in my description of events why I have analysed the practice to represent the republican values of equality and brotherhood (or as I often write, solidarity and respect).

Likewise, Pelto and Pelto emphasise that concepts are “arbitrary selections from the universe of experience”, and that they are “abstractions from concrete observations” (1978: 9). Therefore, when formulating research questions: “All terms in the stated problem must relate to observable natural phenomena of the universe, however indirect the path of abstraction involved” (1978: 27). Pelto and Pelto acknowledge that all terms used by anthropologists do not have “accessible empirical referents” (1978: 27). They emphasise, however, that if abstract, relational terms are used in research, “the research design must [...] make clear to the reader just what observational procedures will be taken as evidence supporting a proposition involving the abstract concept” (1978: 27).

Ritual⁵⁸ is the most significant abstract and analytical term I use. In Chapter 8 I make clear why I think this is a pertinent conceptualisation of the transformations – “therapy” – practitioners and anthropologist alike say are fundamental in the slam phenomenon. Likewise, I describe in detail in the theoretical introduction in Chapter 4 as well as in Chapter 7, how I interpret the therapy and turning “sheep” into full humans can be related to the “civilisation deficit” and “bodies of exception” analysed by Lapeyronnie (2005) and Barkat (2005), respectively. Furthermore, in Chapter 8, I use the terms of *techne* (craftsmanship) and *poiesis* (unconcealment, bringing forth, creation). These terms I connect to expressions the slammers themselves use, and through using the experience-distant theoretical concepts, I aspire to make their insights able to “travel” and be applicable elsewhere.

Several slammers analyse the slam phenomenon similarly to how I do, and several more or less directly suggest that it says something about the state of affairs in France, like when Yo likens slam to the revolutionary “Tennis court oath”. At the highest level of abstraction, my analysis – in contrast to the slammers’ – tries to grasp the connection between personhood and notions of community (Chapter 9). Many see slam as dealing with issues of personhood (“therapy”) and the creation of community (“a big family”) (Chapter 7). In addition, I try to make clear how the specificities of personhood – the human as foremost universal but also including elements of difference – connect with a notion of community where the values of freedom (in terms of “my freedom ends where your starts”, not liberalist freedom from institutions), equality and brotherhood (respect and solidarity) are pivotal (Chapter 9 and 10). Furthermore, through the analytical concept of ritual, I try to spell out how slam can transform selves and personhood (to full human beings (Chapter 8), universal and different (Chapter 10)). The first is also in accordance with the slammers’ own descriptions – in different words – of what occurs. The latter however, I would like to point out, I solely analyse through poems, comparison and personal experience. I have not sought to analyse the *reception* of the poems (and as I noted above concerning the criticism of Souleymane Diamanka, their reception is probably highly varied). I still however claim that listening to these poems of

⁵⁸ Only one slammer who is in addition peripheral to my material, Pilote Le Hot, said that slam can be a ritual.

universality and difference in the heterogeneous space of slam does something profound to the listener and his or her understanding of humans and their societies.

For me, as for many of the slammers, slam talks to important individual, social and political questions. Particularly through the workshops, but also through the sessions themselves, they “pass the baton”, as Johann (Yo) put it, for new people to discover the magic of slam, its equality, democracy and therapy. In significant ways, my work is also an attempt to pass the baton, but in slightly different words, and with a different audience in mind.

Chapter 4 - Theoretical Introduction

Slam: personhood, belonging and community spanning the colonial gap

I will now outline the theoretical landscape of my explorations. Summing up from Part One, slam is as an artistic, social and political phenomenon with the capacity of opening up ways of being as well as ways of being together. It creates relations between people that in the ethos of democratic equality, listening, and acknowledgement have the capacity to confirm an individual existence for each singular participant. Slam thus answers to, on the one hand, personal and existential quests and questions and, on the other hand, social and societal ones. The basic feature of the personhood it promotes is full humanness for all, with equal access to the time and space of the slam session. Existentially, in the open world of slam, one can gain an *open* vision – in contrast to contained or enclosed – of what it means to be human, measuring oneself with the sky, within open, and sometimes distant, horizons. In the ontology of slam, in “becoming”, the human being is reduced to a “dirt-proof is” and going forward on “a path of different taste for everyone and finally the same day for all”. Slam thus addresses issues of personhood, belonging and community. Central values relate to heterogeneity and equality, and conviviality and solidarity. How is slam doing this?

I will start this theoretical contextualisation by addressing what I see as one of the main reasons for the need for spaces where selfhood and relations between people can be transformed in France. The practice of producing and confirming full humans is a continuous process, and it takes various forms under various conditions. According to the anthropologist Victor Turner, there is a close relationship or even dialectic, between larger, societal dramas and crises and ritual or artistic performances where the latter can redress and even reintegrate or change fundamental social fractures (see Chapter 9). I will emphasise that this redress or reintegration takes place on a personal and a societal level simultaneously, reconstituting person(hood)s as well as relations between people.

Underlying issues of belonging and *vivre ensemble* in Paris in the 21st century, there are gaps cracking up society. What can be called the “colonial gap” seems to be the major fracture, where certain children of the “indivisible Republic” are relegated to a status of lesser humans, bodies of exception (Barkat 2005), with a “deficit in civilisation” (Lapeyronnie 2005). The term “colonial gap” is taken from the book with the same title, in French *La Fracture Coloniale* (Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire 2005). This term plays on the well-known expression *la fracture sociale* – the *social* gap, division, in society. With this neologism, the authors Pascal Blanchard, Nicholas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire thus immediately indicate that questions of social inequalities in France must be seen in connection with the colonial past. In this thesis, however, I explore strong forces working in the opposite direction, blurring boundaries and mending fractures: In the streets of northeast Paris and with a stronger articulation in the slam sessions in the same neighbourhoods, trajectories and stories, ethos and practice, contribute to the dissolution of the aggregated distinctions of inequality, of processes of segregation and stereotyping, and of *insécurité* (Chapters 5, 9 and 10).

The colonial gap: the muzzled ones and full human beings

French colonial memories have become illegitimate and mutilated, and the colonial aspect of French history has been amputated, claim the editors of *La fracture coloniale* (Blanchard et al. 2005: 16).⁵⁹ According to the three historians, the colonial dead-end has been hard to swallow for both the right-wing Gaullist believers in the grandeur of France as well as for the left-wing republican believers in the civilising mission. The result is an “institutionalised forgetting” (*oubli institutionnalisé*) or even “denial” (*déni*) that keeps national and colonial history as two separate entities (2005: 14). This denial and separation is mirrored in the way immigration has been treated in French metropolitan history: The professor in North African history Benjamin Stora writes that one gets the impression that North African immigration is an extremely new issue, “as if ‘they’ have always been foreigners to the national history” (Stora 2005: 65; see Wieviorka 2006 for a similar point).

⁵⁹ One example they give is the limited attention given to the colonial question in the seven volumes, 130 articles long oeuvre *Lieux de mémoire* – Places of memory (Nora (ed.) 1984-1993).

Omission or forgetting (*l'oubli*) has for several centuries been central in the construction of a past that serves the present in French history: Social cohesion, the *vivre ensemble* (“living together”), has been seen as fragile, and historical events marking out certain categories of the population or having the potential of setting groups up against each other, have been thought of as threatening to the cohesion of the nation (Corbin 2006). In his inauguration speech in 2007 the newly elected President Sarkozy said:

The French people have expressed themselves. [...] I will put back into honour the nation and national identity. I will give the pride of being French back to the French. I will end with the repentance [⁶⁰] which is a form of self-hatred, and the competition of memories which nourish hatred of others.⁶¹

In contrast to Sarkozy, Blanchard et al. (2005) do not see the so-called “competition in memory” between “victimised” categories of the population as a sign of too much “repentance” over the colonial past, but instead as a result of too much denial and institutionalised forgetting.

Rather than going into debates about competition in memory or too much repentance – neither are in my opinion significantly present in slam⁶² – I look at slam as “promoting speech without muzzle,” as some practitioners put it.⁶³ This metaphor – somehow similarly treated in a poem by Hocine Ben: “One doesn’t silence the poet by muzzling his dog!” – suggests speech or poetry as the counteraction of the inhumane treatment of muzzling someone. The role of speech is central throughout the thesis, but here it suffices to remind of its uniquely human attribute: Muzzling signals an inferior treatment, the right to (free) speech and to be listened to points to de-muzzling,

⁶⁰ Repentance over colonialism, presumably, but I think the vagueness is a point in itself.

⁶¹ Le peuple français s'est exprimé. Il a choisi de rompre avec les idées, les habitudes et les comportements du passé. Je veux réhabiliter le travail, l'autorité, la morale, le respect, le mérite. Je veux remettre à l'honneur la nation et l'identité nationale. Je veux rendre aux Français la fierté d'être Français. Je veux en finir avec la repentance qui est une forme de haine de soi, et la concurrence des mémoires qui nourrit la haine des autres. (Source e.g. here: <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/010118844-le-discours-de-nicolas-sarkozy> accessed 17.08.2011)

⁶² Some slammers might disagree with me that there is neither repentance nor competition of victims in slam, as I pointed out in the previous, methodological chapter.

⁶³ Hocine Ben in the poem *La Muselière*, “The Muzzle”, translated in Chapter 10, and Abd el Haq and Johann Guyot-Baron (Yo) in their promotion of a slam session.

reinstalling human dignity. Another animal metaphor that will become central is that of the sheep. From the condition of “sheep”, rises the free man who knows what has brought him where he is, according to the slammer Dgiz.

This thesis is not about the division between Paris and her suburbs, neither about the “colonial gap” in French society. Rather, it describes a way the divided socio-political geography, muted histories and the de-muzzled humans can be united into a democratic, cosmopolitan, heteroglossic version of France. I call this France *La France Métissée*, “mixed France”. Another expression is *terre d’accueil*, land of welcome – the France that always has welcomed and assimilated immigrants. As a backdrop to understand in what kind of environment this uniting heteroglossia plays out, I will briefly sketch up the perspective of “the colonial spatial and temporal gap”. Empirically, this is very much in line with what I have experienced in France both through observations and in conversations.

There are (at least) three different explanations for why the French republican, assimilating melting-pot has not functioned properly in relation to many children of postcolonial immigrants. One view, which has been widespread from the early 20th century when the colonial migration grew, states that these migrants – in contrast to European ones – were too alien by “ethnic origin, heritage, costumes, mentality, character and level of civilisation” to assimilate easily (Blanchard 2005: 178). Others, particularly the historian Gérard Noiriel, claim that the melting-pot still works, but – as was the case with all previous waves of immigration – it takes time. The deindustrialisation also causes a new challenge, as it leaves a void in the labour market for manual work and stops the very successful assimilation carried out by labour unions in earlier times. The third and most recent perspective in French research is proposed by historians and sociologists in the collective work *La fracture coloniale* and several more recent volumes in the same vein. These works indicate how a colonial model continues to differentiate the population along “ethnic” lines, thus perpetuating discriminatory social hierarchies. The “equality” of the Republic has never been truly equal, and its universal “man” and notion of universality are highly historically situated (Blanchard et al. 2005).

It will become clear from my writing that I find numerous evidence of this third view to be correct. At the same time, the second perspective is also worth keeping in

mind. The behaviour and statements of belonging of most children of postcolonial immigrants seem to be French and republican to the core. By republican, in this context I mean a conception of citizenship and civic belonging based on the individual's relationship to the state, without any intermediate communities or identities. This is in contrast to a multicultural conception in Anglo-American thought where society consists of a plethora of communities and where hyphenated identities are widespread, (like British Pakistani or Italian American).⁶⁴ Thus despite the fractures caused by the colonial gap, the French melting pot seems to work in the sense of creating belonging and identification.

Bodies of exception

What is often silenced, according to the perspective of the colonial gap, is the stark inequality that the Republic which promises Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood for all its citizens has produced throughout its history. Issues of slavery are important, so is the silencing of the slave uprising and revolution at Haiti in 1791.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, what particularly epitomises the Republican paradox – the peculiar inequality in lieu of the promise of equality – is the extraordinary status of the French Muslims of French Algeria. While native Jews as well as European immigrants to Algeria quickly obtained full citizenship rights, Muslims were granted the status of subject, *indigène* (“indigenous”) not citizen, with accompanying duties but neither full rights nor full juridical protection from, for instance, collective punishment, deportation and random violence (Barkat 2005). From 1944 when this policy was officially abandoned, 65 000 (out of 7 million, thus less than 1%) Muslims were accorded a personal, not inheritable citizenship after solemnly declaring that they “adhered to the institutions of the colonising country and its politics” (Chollet 2005: my translation, also Barkat 2005).

The Algerian philosopher Sidi Mohammed Barkat (2005, undated) describes the colonial subject as a “body of exception” that is susceptible to arbitrary violence and

⁶⁴ I will compare the two philosophies of integration as they are played out in the sister phenomena of French and US-American slam in Chapter 9.

⁶⁵ A relational, open understanding of the Enlightenment and the achievements of the 1789 Revolution, in contrast to a bounded and essentialist view, would not have feared that the Black slaves emancipated themselves and thus expanded the meaning and promises of Enlightenment thought and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. I will compare a relational and an essentialist, bounded understanding of Europe, her history, ideas and identities, in Chapter 11.

unequal treatment by the law, as a non-included member of the nation. Inspired by the Italian philosopher Agamben, Barkat argues that a regime of exception with its juridical apparatus of inequality and antidemocratic measures is attached to the skin of the colonised who is considered unworthy of citizenship. The classification is inscribed in the body, and the body becomes a symbol of the inequalities. Barkat analyses two massacres in particular, one in Algeria, and the other in Paris. The latter is a key event that resurfaces regularly throughout this thesis. It took place in 1961, on 17 October. It was the first time before November 2005 that the law on state of emergency was put into force on French metropolitan soil. In October 1961, a curfew was imposed on “French Muslims of Algeria” in the Paris region, in the “indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic”⁶⁶. Against this curfew, Algerians arranged a pacifistic demonstration. Barkat writes that they put on their best clothes in order to prove their worth as full human beings and to expose their bodies in public, in a public act of freedom and equality, similar to the slave uprising in Haiti two years after the French Revolution. Barkat starts an article by saying that nothing, ever, can replace the witnessing of those who lived through the drama: He does not want to replace their voices. The police brutally – with hatred, which is a fact that really intrigues the philosopher – beat several hundred of the demonstrators to death and threw their bodies into the Seine. Neither the number of dead nor their names have been confirmed.

The civilisation deficit, the suburbs and the *jeunes de banlieues*

A legal differentiation is certainly no longer in practice in metropolitan France. Didier Lapeyronnie, professor in sociology at Sorbonne University, likens however the life of discrimination and segregation in the deprived French suburbs to a colonial subordination, particularly:

the feeling of being defined by a permanent “civilisation” deficit in the discourse of power, to be subjugated to the orders of integration at the

⁶⁶ From Article 1 of Constitution of the Fifth Republic: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. ...” Source <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp> accessed 16.11.2011

very moment society deprives you of the means [to integrate], directly evoke the “colony” and therefore, for a number of inhabitants of immigrant origin, “a past that does not go away”.^[67] In France today, the individuals from the “problem areas” (“*quartiers sensibles*”) are reduced to silence politically speaking, kept in a very strong economical dependency and socially and culturally dominated by a real “system” of institutionalisation of racism and colonial relations. (Lapeyronnie 2005: 210, my translation)

Lapeyronnie describes a lack of civilisation, lack of means and a lack of voice. He goes on to claim that inhabitants in these suburbs feel they do not have a political existence, and to the extent they feel they are considered as *citoyens*, it is a kind of second-rate citizenship (2005: 210).

Before I move on to connecting these notions of lack with suburban rioters and slammers, two phenomena need to be clarified: The French *banlieue* and “youth from the *banlieue*”.

Banlieue and jeune de banlieue: stereotypes, subalterns and “sheep”

Banlieue is the French term for the areas around French cities, and I will use it interchangeably with the English “suburb”. I emphasise however the almost contradictory connotations of the two terms.

In the United States, the word suburb carries a positive connotation associated with private property, middle-class ease, low-density population, and an overall high quality of life. In contrast, the immediate connotation of the French *banlieue* and its inhabitants, the *banlieuesards*[sic!], is one of overcrowded public housing, people of color, new immigrants, and crime (Castañeda 2010: 52).

⁶⁷ This sentence is taken from the book *Vichy, un passé qui ne se passe pas*, by Henry Rousso the author of *The Vichy Syndrome*

Concerning stereotypes, the French banlieues are thus more similar to the American *ghetto*, in “the aspects of categorical inequality, exclusion from the labor market, and social boundaries resulting in residential segregation” (Castañeda 2010: 52). While many who live in the banlieues confront the stereotypes and claim that the media and political discourse ignore the diversity of the inhabitants and their occupations (see e.g. the poem “Saint Denis” by Grand Corps Malade quoted in Chapter 9), the differences in standard of living between Paris proper and the disadvantaged banlieues are widely acknowledged. The stereotypes therefore have a basis in reality in terms of inequality in available education compared to Paris proper (inexperienced teachers, pupils in need of more help –attempted remedied unsatisfactory in the policy of zones of prioritised education (ZEP)), inequality in public transport, inequality in access to cultural institutions, inequality in housing conditions. The list is long. Stigmatisation – ethnically as well as based on place of residence – deepens the senses of rejection by the local population and the crisis in social bonds (Parmentier 2010: 173).

Related to the “problem areas” of the banlieues is the “problem youth” of the *jeune de banlieue*. In the French dictionary of racism, exclusion and discrimination (Benbassa 2010: 422-3), the “youth from the (housing) estates” (*jeune de cité*) are described as a *stereotype* in media imaginaries and certain political discourses of males between 12 and 30, who hang around in the suburbs: They have major difficulties at school, and are burdened with dysfunctional families, lack of parental authority, unemployment and racism. The youth’s response to the stigmatisation, segregation, rejection, relegation and police harassment is also part of the stereotype: They form a “counter-society of rebels” consisting of rap music, a certain way of dressing and speaking, of cannabis usage and gang activity, such as drug dealing and petty crime. Their behaviour is aggressive as they are often involved in intimidation, theft and brawls. Esther Benbassa (2010) counters the stereotype by pointing out that this “all-embracing and essentialist” description is relevant only to a minority of youth who lives in the suburbs.

I would like to take a different perspective from Benbassa and go further in analysing the particular stereotype itself. Just like the problems of the banlieues consist of *stigmatisation* as well as socio-economic *inequalities*, the hooded youth or young man,

often – but far from exclusively – of North-African or South Saharan origin, with his particular way of speaking, certainly represents a widespread stereotype. However, he is also a visible presence in France, as elsewhere in Europe (but then of different ethnic origins). I suggest that the evasive and reclusive gang activity (being a “sheep”, in Dgiz’s expression, see Chapter 7) is only one route of counter-action to the stigmatised social identity. Another is the conscious playing with the stereotype itself, a re-appropriation of the stigma, like the usage of Arabic in the streets of Paris I described in the ethnographic introduction in Chapter 2. Is the *jeune de banlieue* a kind of subaltern, a person “socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure”⁶⁸ with a very limited agency and limited right – and even ability – to speak, and expectations of being heard? Do the youth employ conscious attempts to dissolve the hegemonic taxonomy all together? I will return to this preliminary analysis from the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) notion of “minority” in the final chapter.

Civilisation deficit, victimisation and stereotyping

The civilisation deficit, the limited agency, and limited right and ability speak for certain people, as described by Lapeyronnie (2005), are however not restricted to the suburbs. Rather it sticks to the skin of certain people (Barkat 2005) far into the circles of benevolent and “open-minded” people in contemporary art and music (see Chapter 8 for further comments on “engaged” French theatre). The very talented and successful slammer Dgiz is a former gang member and ex-convict with a father as well as maternal grandparents born in Algeria. He talks of the life in the suburbs as “the rearing of sheep” (*l’élevage des moutons*), particularly in respect to the immigrants. A rearing that for the previous generation led to filling the empty spaces in the labour market for manual work, but for his generation – he is in his mid thirties – and the next, it too often leads to prison for petty crime (see Chapter 7). Now, collaborations with people from “high art” are – together with the slam workshops – the source of Dgiz’s meagre livelihood.⁶⁹

In the following quote, Dgiz warns against the kind of stereotyping that I, in the methodological introduction in Chapter 3, claimed that victimised Souleymane

⁶⁸ Source: Wikipedia: subaltern (postcolonialism) (accessed 24.08.2011). (Cf. Loomba 1998.)

⁶⁹ He is also, as a handful of other slammers, registered as an *intermittent du spectacle*, a kind of “freelance artist”, who has the right to collect unemployment benefits for the time he is not working.

Diamanka. I remark that Dgiz and I had not discussed this particular case, or discussed this issue at all for the matter, thus we had observed it independently of each other.

I hope he [Souleymane] won't become a "token Black" (*noir de service*), because one is capable of that in France (*on est capable*), one capable with a Black. I felt it immediately, "The token Arab" (*l'Arabe de service*), even though I respect them [the people he's been working with, I suppose]. I respect them a lot! They've got to have a Black, an Arab, a queer, an "AIDS", an ex-convict (*ancien voyou*). I, I didn't want to be the ex-convict.⁷⁰ I could very well have been, but I didn't want to. My image was about to be drawn: Reformed ex-convict with children. Hey, it's my life! I've got my private life.

When Dgiz reconstructed himself as a man, not a sheep, he still sees himself as up against attempts to reduce his life to a cliché or stereotype – a mass of undifferentiated bodies (Barkat 2005) – even by benevolent people in arts, if I understand him correctly. One of the first times I visited him at the place he lived, a man from a theatre or film company had come to see him in order to hire him for a project. He was middle-aged, about 68, leftist and with artsy appearance, polite and friendly. I was quite surprised to see how he treated Dgiz – more or less behind his back – in certain respects. Dgiz says about himself that he – like many in the suburbs – lacks sufficient *savoir-faire*, knowledge about how to behave himself – because he has not been much to school and has not seen much of the world. So he clearly *feels* this "civilisation deficit" described by the sociologist Lapeyronnie. This otherwise respectful man from the theatre tried to exchange glances with the other seemingly white, middle class woman (Sandra, whom I will introduce in Chapter 6) about things Dgiz said and did, the way he speaks and his manners. He even commented to her, when Dgiz went back and forth to the open kitchen, as he was the only one who cleaned the table, that the steak Dgiz had served her was overdone (which is a clear sign in France, of course, of lack of civilisation). Dgiz probably heard the exchange because just afterwards he excused himself for the food.

⁷⁰ When Dgiz slips from the token Arab stereotype to the one of the reformed ex-convict in this quote, I think there are several reasons. Sometimes they want him as an "Arab", as he pointed out on a television show where four different slammers – "one White, one Black, one Arab and one animal" (Pilote) according to Dgiz represented well the diversity of slam, as well as fulfilled the wish for token coloured people. In addition, the term *voyou*, "delinquent", often connotes Arab.

I later asked Dgiz what he thought about the man. “Ok,” he said, without any further comments. I interpret the way the man gesticulated about Dgiz behind his back to be racist, “classist” or both. In a society such as France where etiquette and the knowledge of how to behave is such a basic token of class, Dgiz is constantly reminded of his humble and broken background. I think he noticed the man’s behaviour but did not want to talk to me about it, either because it is normal to him or more likely, as I have noticed when people face blatant but insidious stigmatisation in other situations, to talk about it only creates an unequal relationship victimising and humiliating the offended person.

I will end this section on the colonial gap cracking up the belonging and cohesion in the *vivre ensemble* with a related threat to the social cohesion: the delegitimisation of much of present day politics, as large parts of the population no longer feel heard, seen or that they participate.

The time of the revolts, and faith and force in speech

The anthropologist Alain Bertho at the University of Paris 8-Saint-Denis analyses the rioters of the autumn 2005 (with rioters in general the last three decades, which is the scope of his book *Le temps des émeutes*⁷¹) within the same perspective of “bodies of exception” as Barkat (2005, undated) and similarly and indirectly the colonial gap of historical structures of inequalities. He finds the root of the riots in a fracture (*décalage*) that has widened between large portions of the population, on the one hand, and institutionalised politics and the institutionalised interpreters and analysts, like social scientists and journalist, on the other hand. Here, Bertho echoes Barkat’s insistence on the voice of the witnesses themselves. Bertho calls the riots a mute revolt against silence, a silence that has been imposed on them as they have been deprived of all legitimacy of speech (Bertho 2009: 60). The root is “in that which the politics do not say, do not see, refuse to name and to see” (Bertho 2009: 45). The question of today’s riots is no longer to take the power, Bertho claims but “to take speech (*prendre la parole*), to become visible and to break the silence” (Bertho 2009: 193). He also argues that politicians and

⁷¹ The title “Time of the riots” probably plays on the title of the song that has become emblematic for the Paris Commune, *Le temps de cerises*, “Time of the cherry blossoms”.

commentators easily speak *on behalf of* a muted (Cf. Ardener 1975) population, and thus mute their experience even further. It is here worth bearing in mind the anthropologist Veena Das' point that voice cannot be given to the victim (1995b: 175), and that "the suffering of victims [in India after the partition] was simulated in voices that appropriated it, and appropriated it in order to create legitimacy for the appropriators" (1995b: 191). Similarly, Bertho argues that politicians, social scientists and journalists reduce the riots to "symptoms" and "warnings" and "interpret" them within the professional commentators' own traditional political language (Bertho 2009: 39). I argue that slam originates in similar conditions of silencing, muting, disregard and disrespect of certain perspectives and experiences, but where the rioters have lost faith in words and speech (Bertho 2009: 59), slam attempts to bring back a basic faith, and a transformative and utopian force in the right to speak and to be heard. As Dgiz sums up the essence of working with disadvantaged youth, "I reconcile them with language" (See Chapter 8).

La France Métissée and the becoming and heterogeneity of slam

I now proceed from the muzzling, stigmatising and segregating processes of the colonial gap into the characteristics of the two environments or social spaces that play an important role in this thesis: The venues where slam sessions take place, and the northeastern Parisian neighbourhood of Belleville where the slam scene proliferates. In this second part of this theoretical contextualisation, I will outline the processes at play in this environment creating human dignity and open senses of belonging and community.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the socio-political landscape of this area of the city so marked – in the small-scale businesses, on façades, posters, street-art and street-life itself – by wave upon wave of immigration and popular resistance, as well as stately republicanism, is best described through the anthropologist Tim Ingold's concept of "inhabitation" (2007), or what he earlier called "dwelling" (2000).

[A] 'dwelling perspective', according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves. (Ingold 2000: 189)

Ingold's perspective is largely developed in a non-urban environment where wind, rain and the human contribution to the photosynthesis and the ecosystem play a large part in the weaving of the "archi-texture", and where earthly substances 'rise up' in the forms of plants and animals (inspired from Heidegger in Ingold 2008: 1803). This perspective is easily translatable to a city environment as well, where human beings build and re-appropriate the environment for their own purposes and "undercut the strategic designs of society's master-builders, causing them gradually to wear out and disintegrate (Ingold 2007: 103). Structures of re-appropriation also become an enduring record shaping the behaviour of human action and interaction, like the numerous records of the rebellious Paris Commune from 1871, the more recent struggles for the rights of undocumented immigrants, and the activity of one of the world's most prolific and original scene of street artists.

Ingold's understanding of the role of beings, or life, is inspired by Henri Bergson, and his notion that an "organism that lives is a thing that endures" (Bergson 1911 quoted in Ingold 2008: 1804). Nevertheless, it endures like an "eddy in the current of life" (2008: 1804). An eddy is a swirling counter current moving opposite, and often circular, to the main current, due to an obstacle.⁷² Life is "movement itself, wherein every organism emerges as a peculiar disturbance that interrupts the linear flow, winding it up into the forms we see" (2008: 1804, emphasis removed). The winding is life itself, a becoming, weaving its way into a meshwork of other trails of becoming. The "very permanence of its form is only the outline of a movement" (Bergson 1911 quoted in Ingold 2008: 1804). I will now explore the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the heterogeneous and fluid bundles of relations of the world of slam and the becoming humans that inhabit it.

Weaving the textures of life and world

Tim Ingold's perspective on the environment as zones of entanglement, is inspired by the article "Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology" by ethnographer and philosopher Annemarie Mol and the sociologist John Law (1994). Ingold also refers

⁷² Source: Wikipedia: eddy (fluid dynamics) (Accessed 17.01.2012).

to *A Thousand Plateaus*, by Deleuze and Guattari, which also Mol and Law seem inspired by, without explicitly stating so. Central understandings the three works share are the move away from bounded and binary identities in the direction of being as becoming and heterogeneous and as singularities of material-forces interweaving in all kinds of relations. The boundaries blur as the trails of becoming interweave (Ingold 2008).

The dissolving space of aggregated distinctions

In the practice of giving all participants equal time and equal opportunity to be listened to, the slam session has found a way to reverse one of the most fundamental distinguishing social processes where the sense of ownership to public space and time depend on your social standing. In the classical and comprehensive sociological analysis *Distinction* (1995, 1984, 1979), Bourdieu sees the relationship between social class and with what ease and naturalness one's body and speech extend in social space and time as a principal outcome of social conditioning. He aims to show how socio-cultural-political differences are aggregated and unified into a seamless whole (1995: 36) of distinct class positions from an initially indivisible continuum of differences and variations (Bourdieu 1995: 238; Bourdieu 1979: 559). The following quote concerning the right to time and space represents a cornerstone in Bourdieu's understanding of the workings of social distinctions and distinguishing:

Everything takes place as if the social conditionings linked to a social condition tended to inscribe the relation to the social world in a lasting, generalized relation to one's own body, a way of bearing one's body, presenting it to others, moving it, making space for it, which gives the body its social physiognomy. Bodily hexis, a basic dimension of the sense of social orientation, is a practical way of experiencing and expressing one's own sense of social value. *One's relationship to the social world and to one's proper place in it is never more clearly expressed than in the space and time one feels entitled to take from others, more precisely, in the space one claims with one's body in physical space, through a bearing and gestures that are*

self-assured or reserved, expansive or constricted ('presence' or 'insignificance') *and with one's speech in time*, through the interaction time one appropriates and the self-assured or aggressive, careless or unconscious way one appropriates it.⁷³ (Bourdieu 1984: 474, my emphases)

The social conditioning, through the school system, public debate, interaction in public spaces and small everyday interactions applies a bodily and mental "muzzle" to a large portion of the French population. The behaviour of the theatre or film person interested in hiring Dgiz I referred to above, I interpreted to be an expression of distinguishing practices. The middleclass person found Dgiz to behave sufficiently odd that it was worth trying to exchange glances with the other person in the room he presumed shared his distinguishing knowledge. If I analysed the situation correctly, I am also quite certain that Dgiz sensed what was going on as he felt he had to excuse himself. The sensation of being *maladroit* can very likely enhanced his perception of himself as a person lacking *savoir-vivre*.

The amount of time and space one feels one has free access to and the self-assurance that comes with it, are inscribed into the body, the body hexis and the habitus of the different social classes. The emphasis on equal treatment practiced exactly in terms of equal right to the space of the limelight and the time of the listeners of Parisian slam poetry provides a parameter to de-muzzle the muzzled ones. I am now approaching the crux of the argument: How can slamming "unconceal" full human beings behind muzzles, stigmas, suffering and wounds inscribed into the very body hexis as well as habitus of the participants? I will first explore the epistemology of "nomad thought" of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) which I will argue bear strong resemblance to an epistemology practiced in slam space. Next, I will map out the relationship between truth, therapy, the universal human and difference in Parisian slam.

⁷³ In a footnote, Bourdieu cites a study in social psychology which "establishes a correlation between the room one gives oneself in physical space and the place one occupies in social space" (Bourdieu 1984: 596 n12).

An epistemology of heterogeneity and becoming

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari's come up with the notion of "nomad thought" in order to describe a way of approaching the world that "do not reflect upon the world but [is] immersed in a changing state of things," as the English translator Brian Massumi describes it (Massumi 2004: xiii). I interpret this position to be similar to the basic condition of inductiveness of anthropological knowledge production, as described by Mitchell (2010), and also Haraway's statement, "my examples are my theories" (Haraway 2000: 108, italics omitted). It also resembles ways of perceiving, prevalent in the slam milieu, humans and their world. I will now explore how. Nomad thought, according to Deleuze and Guattari, "synthesizes a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for further rearranging (to the contrary). The *modus operandi* of nomad thought is affirmation" (Massumi 2004: xiii, brackets in original). Thus, it is an affirmation of the heterogeneity of the elements – even when they synthesise – and of the possibility of further rearrangements (See point two below). Similarly, in slam space, elements – be it persons or stories, trajectories, experiences and the like that persons consist of – are affirmed in their heterogeneity and in recombinations. "Nomad space is 'smooth', or open-ended," Massumi writes (2004: xiii).

The model [of nomad space] is a vortical one; it operates in an open space throughout which things-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 399)

Likewise, slam space is open and consisting of singularities, not preconceived identities, in movement, transformation and becoming.

Deleuze and Guattari summarise nomad thought as an epistemology consisting of four points. I will shortly come back to their relevance for my field of study. First, it "uses a *hydraulic model*, rather than being a theory of solids treating fluids as a special case" (2004 [1980]: 398, my emphasis). Second, it is a model "of *becoming* and *heterogeneity*, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant" (2004: 398, my emphasis) Third, the flows do not run parallel (2004: 399), but (like in a

rhizome) any point can be connected to anything other (2004: 7), as the *lines curves into spirals and vortices* (2004: 399, my emphasis). I will develop this aspect further in the next paragraph, but first I will sum up Deleuze and Guattari's fourth point: The epistemological model is *problematic* (rather than *theorematic*⁷⁴) in the sense that it goes from "a problem to the accidents that condition and resolve it" (2004: 399). Thus, the "problematic" model concerns itself with events rather than essence (2004: 399), or flows and processes rather than stables and variables. Perhaps one can say that it is inductive, in the sense that it goes from the particular, rather than deductive and axiomatic?

Deleuze and Guattari liken their epistemological model to the heterogeneity and becoming of epicurean atomism⁷⁵ (2004: 398) where the notion of clinamen plays an important role. The clinamen is the spontaneous swerve or deviation of the atoms that makes them clash together (and makes molecules).⁷⁶ Thus, the third point states; the flows do not run parallel, but swirls like the clinamen. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze describes the clinamen as:

[B]y no means a change of direction in the movement of an atom, much less an indetermination testifying to the existence of a physical freedom. It is the original determination of the direction of movement, the synthesis of movement and its direction which relates one atom to another (Deleuze 2004 [1968]: 232).

The original motion is thus a swerve binding the indivisible epicurean atoms into molecules without effacing the heterogeneity of the atoms, neither their possibility for future rearrangements. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between what they call *smooth* space, "occupied without being counted", and *striated* (metric) space, which is "counted in order to be occupied" (Pierre Boulez quoted in Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 399). They also describe this as a distinction between the hylomorphic (matter-form) model and the

⁷⁴ Theorematic is the adjective form of theorem, which means a mathematical principle to be demonstrated or proved. A problem, on the other hand, is something to be solved. (Source: <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/search:theorem> (accessed 11.08.2011)).

⁷⁵ Epicurean atomism claims that the universe consists of small indivisible parts in constant swerving motion.

⁷⁶ Source: French Wikipedia: Clinamen (accessed 23.08.2011).

material-forces model, where in the latter it is “not a question of extracting constants from variables but of placing the variables themselves in a state of continuous variation” (2004: 407). The former implies a “form that organizes matter and a matter prepared for the form” (2004: 407), which I choose to translate into “identities”. In contrast, in the material-forces model, matter is not homogenised, but “laden with singularities” (2004: 407). The material-forces of the continuously variable variables “seize or determine singularities in the matter, instead of constituting a general form. They effect individuation through events or haecceities⁷⁷], not through the ‘object’ as a compound of matter and form” (2004: 408).

The first point in Deleuze and Guattari’s epistemology describes a “hydraulic” model of reality that resembles the fluid social space of Mol and Law (1994)⁷⁸ which I use to describe central features and processes in the slam session as well as in a neighbourhood like Belleville. The relevant characteristics of fluids, in contrasts to solids, are the lack of clear boundaries – qualities and characteristics thus form continuums rather than dichotomies, the ability to mix and the movement. These characteristics are also relevant in the second epistemological feature of Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming and heterogeneity”, which in my opinion is similarly grasped in Antoine (Tô)’s poem I quoted in Part I. The third epistemological feature is the “smooth space” of swerving and clashing atoms, of “singularities” (material-forces) and not identities (matter-forms) which “effect individuation through events or haecceities” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 408). A slam session as a whole as well as the individual performances can all be seen as haecceities – unique, intangible events – in curving in spirals and vortices like the Giant’s kettle churning water, air and pebbles for a while. The individuals in Parisian slam and the way they portray themselves also appear to a large extent as haecceities and

⁷⁷ Haecceity is a philosophical term which denotes the particularities (“thisness”) of a thing in contrast to its universal qualities (its “whatness” or quiddity) which it shares with other things of the same kind. Haecceity is intangible (“insaisissable”) by definition and implies a principle of individuation which is hard to define. The example the French Wikipedia entry gives of quiddity is “a bench is an artefact for sitting down on” in contrast to a haecceity “this is the bench on which we kissed” (source: fr.Wikipedia: *eccéité*, accessed 11.08.2011).

⁷⁸ The language and ideas of Mol and Law’s article from 1994 bear strong resemblance of – particularly this section on nomad thought from – *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari’s, originally from 1980.

singularities, as Dgiz when he counters any simple categorisation as “Arab” or “ex-convict with children” with “Hey, it’s my life!”

The fourth epistemological feature of Deleuze and Guattari’s nomad thought is its problematic, not theorematic orientation. Rather than searching to define, classify and establish the essence and variables of the phenomenon, it searches to distinguish the processes that lead up to and comes out of a particular phenomenon (or particular bundle of lines, or entanglement, as Ingold⁷⁹ calls organisms making up meshwork). I understand this to be in line with anthropological production of knowledge, like I pointed out above with reference to Mitchell (2010). Similarly, persons and their paths, stories and slams are ideally – perceived in this open-ended manner in the open-ended, hydraulic event of a slam session.

The fluidity of slam space

In the article “Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology” Annemarie Mol and John Law (1994) compare three “topological” presuppositions of social reality which they say “frame the performance of social similarity and difference” (1994: 642). They conceptualise “the social” as *performing* different kinds of space or topologies, which coexist and transform into one another. In the space they term “*regions*”, objects are clustered together and boundaries are drawn around each cluster” (1994: 643). Within regions, differences are suppressed, but are highlighted in-between them. The Paris-suburb divide I suggest can be seen, as well as experienced, as a space conceptualised as “regions”. Contrasts between Paris and the banlieues are emphasised in description (e.g. the way Laurent, Jean and I talked about public transport in the introduction) as well as in actual living conditions (e.g. the actual difference in public transport service). Similarly, the preconceived conceptualisation of *indigènes* and *citoyens*, or identities consisting of stable variables with boundaries in between, seems of the same kind.

Another example of the clustering of regional space is the way the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1995, 1984, 1979) describes the working of distinctions in

⁷⁹ “Becoming is not a connection between this and that but follows a ‘line of flight’ [like the clinamen] that pulls away from both. ... This texture [of lines] is what I mean when I speak of organisms being constituted within a relational field, it is a field not of connectable points but of interwoven lines, not a network but a *meshwork*” (Ingold 2008: 1805, brackets added, italics in original; see also Ingold 2007).

his classical study with the same name. Social conditions condition particular habituses, sets of dispositions (1995: 36). These dispositions – for social perception, lifestyle choices, political views, goods, practices, and particularly the appropriation of time and space – are principles for generating divided/distinct and dividing/distinguishing practices (1995: 37). The dispositions unify and create an affinity of style within the various social positions, which are distinct, relational and hierarchical according to Bourdieu (1995: 33). Distinctions are expressed in everyday language (*lieux communs* (1979: 546)) in “pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects” forming a network of high and low, light and heavy, free and forced, and etc. (Bourdieu 1984: 468).⁸⁰ Mol and Law’s description of “regions” seems much inspired by Bourdieu’s analysis of the social space of France of the 1970s.

“[S]ometimes boundaries come and go, allow leakage or disappear altogether, while relations transform themselves without fracture. Sometimes, then, social space behaves like a *fluid*” (Mol and Law 1994: 643, italics in original). The third kind of topology Mol and Law describe is fluid space where difference and similarity are conceived of as gradual.⁸¹ Mol and Law conceptualise four characteristics of fluid space, summarised as the lack of clear boundaries, mixing, robustness and the intricate relations between the typologies of social space: First, the objects generating it, or that are generated by it, cannot be well defined because they *lack clear boundaries*. A “person overflows her surroundings, and she does so in ways that are quite unpredictable” (p. 659, italics removed). In slam, the person extends his or her body through movements and sound, but also through the particular story he or she tells, which brings along

⁸⁰ Bourdieu refers this “social mythology” back to the “most fundamental opposition within the social order: The opposition between the dominant and the dominated” rooted in the division of labour (1984: 469). In *Liquid Modernity*, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes how deindustrialisation and the recent decades of structural economic change dissolve the class belonging of modern industrial society. I explore this historical development in Chapters 9 and 11.

⁸¹ The second kind of social space Mol and Law draw the contours of is the *network* as conceptualised in actor-network theory. “A network is a series of elements with well defined relations between them” (1994: 649). When the relations start to vary, the network space dissolves into that of a *fluid*, where all “variables are variable” (1994: 663). A reference (without reference) they have probably borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 410) “when one engages in a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants from them” as an element in their description of “nomad science”. I have not seen any examples of social space as a network in this study, only as dissolving networks in the sense that variables and linkages between the elements – for example between person and stage, person and text, person and person – start to vary and turn fluid.

connotations and memories – for listeners as well as performer – far beyond the locality of the slam.

The varying characteristics of *mixtures* are Mol and Law's second point (1994: 660-661). Some elements have higher viscosity and flow less easily than others. In Chapter 10, Ucoc (in his late thirties) tells how he uses the imagery of "Ground Zero" in order for the listeners to better understand what he went through while fleeing from the war in Cambodia. His translation through familiar imagery, I suggest lowers the "viscosity" of his experience and makes it flow freer into the mind and past experiences of the listeners. Gazes, facial expressions, gestures, rhymes, words, expressions and imageries all flow freely. And they might be picked up and used by other slammers. One example: The message "*Amour*." ("Love."), has appeared in neat handwriting on pavements and elsewhere all over Paris for several years.⁸² The man behind the tag, Shakiamuni or Jean-Luc Duez, is a painter and slammer (one of the very first, around age 60). Dgiz became friends with him shortly after he started slamming and had him to write *Amour* on his underarm (as a sign of gratitude and friendship, I think) and made it into a tattoo. Later on, Lorent (in his mid twenties), a successful and original young artist who started out in one of Dgiz's workshops, copied the style of handwriting of his initiator's tattoo, (but used the exclamation Vision! instead). Another example of mixture of flow is the line "we started to run" (*on a commencé à courir*) which the slammer Abd el Haq (around age 30) gave as an exercise at a writing workshop: Both he and Marie-Françoise (in her mid 60s) have made poems from it. Abdel's is about the deaths that sparked off the riots in October-November 2005, hers is about earlier events in French history where people ran from the police (her performance will be presented in Chapter 6, and the poem can be found in Chapter 9). Ucoc on the other hand, suggested that the line was inspired by one of his own poems, which starts with "I ran" (*j'ai couru*) repeated with heavy breathing for a long time, until it is transformed into *je courais* ("I continued running"). This poem plays out in his natal Cambodia.

Mol and Law's third point concerns the *robustness* of a fluid space (1994: 661-663).

⁸² The story can be read about here <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3294859.stm> (accessed 31.05.2011).

[I]n a fluid elements inform each other. But the way they do so may continuously alter. The bonds within fluid spaces aren't stable. Any single component – if it can be singled out – can be missed (Mol and Law 1994: 663).

This quote can quite simply be read as a working definition of both the slam milieu in general and a slam session. Most collaboration between slammers is ephemeral, and for the most part, at sessions neither the host nor the audience know exactly who will turn up and who will come up with the strongest performance on that particular night. Under such circumstances, adaptability – for both host and participant – is crucial. A good slammer is one who *listens* and *attunes* to the surroundings. He or she, Dgiz says:

must have several texts, which he or she is able to interpret in different ways, in the moment. That doesn't mean that he must be an improviser, but a bit though, in the moment. And he's able to adapt to the situation, and to listen, and to share together, with modesty. [...] That's what I teach in the workshops: Open up maximally, and be complete: A good slammer should rather be 80% on everything than 100% in one field and 20% in another: Watch, listen, interpret, articulate, be musical, have movements, a presence, an aura, breathing, equilibrium, bring things along, give images, and *tac* a moment of virtuosity! Give life to the small slam parties, a maximum of life. To me, that's what it means that slam talks.

Slamming is an heterogeneous art form, and the slammer as well as the slam session itself are all the time “in becoming”, in relation to the environment. Antoine (Tô, in his mid 30s) replied to my question of how he chose which text to perform on particular nights:

In fact, there are several parameters that decide why I say a particular text and not another... Simply, if it's a new text, I bring it to all the stages for a while. If not, if it's with a musician like Oliver L'été [as in the session presented in

Chapter 6, see the text at the end of Chapter 8], I often orient myself towards a short text with refrain that give the possibility of a better interaction with the music... Finally, it's according to place (*endroit*), my mood (*humeur*), of what I want to (*envie*) talk about, what I'm ready to take on (*prêt à porter*), what's the ambience (*ambiance*), what is necessary to say there, that night, in that place with those people? (*qu'est-ce qui serait nécessaire de dire là ce soir dans ce lieu avec ces gens ?*)

A text is very rarely interpreted in the same way twice (Cf. Middleton [1999] 2010). There is always a change of tone, emphasis, even when the wording might be the same. And anything capable of carrying meaning – from the smallest expressions in the performance, glances, intonation, to smells, noises, combination of people, circumstances – can be given varying meanings both by performer and audience (Cf. Victor Turner's (1967) notion of multivocality of symbols, their capacity to mean different things to different people).

Fourthly, Mol and Law point out that the three topologies coexist with intricate relations (1994: 663). Within the territorial topology of regions, variables “are averaged and fixed. But in a fluid space all variables are variable”⁸³ (Mol and Law 1994: 663). In a footnote, Mol and Law suggest that some entities can be both a “region” and a “fluid”.⁸⁴ Take any kind of “banlieue attribute” connected to the *jeune de banlieue*, like the use of argot or “verlan”, ways of dressing – in hoodies and baggy hip-hop style clothes – or stereotypical social background features (like cannabis usage, violence, deviance, prison). Within the boundaries of “regions”, they appear as fixed and clear-cut identities incarcerated in perhaps, or at least connected to, a territory (of binary and hierarchical differences). Within the fluid space of slam, the attributes can be disaggregated – decompartmentalised – and gain variable meanings. However, their new fluid, disaggregated meanings depend on the meaning they have had and still have in the

⁸³ “So perhaps it sounds as if fluids are the ‘other’ of regions: that their elements are the noise, the unconscious, the deviance suppressed by regional order” (Mol and Law 1994: 663).

⁸⁴ The article is empirically about diagnosis and treatment of anaemia, and here they illustrate their topological metaphors with vessels, which in some cases are

well-bounded regions that keep their constituents inside them. Larger arteries have solid walls. But the small hair vessels in most organs [...] are permeable to endless chemical substances and many cells (Mol and Law 1994: 671 n54).

“regional” space of the city-suburb divide. Similarly, symbols flowing from the dissolving Bourdieuan aggregates of unified distinctions turned into hierarchical social positions would have no meaning without their previous highly distinguished/distinguishable position within the “regional” space of theoretical classes. I think here of the mixing of people with different trajectories and from different social universes and strata of French society. They come together and listen to stories originating in very different environments, however usually written with the heterogeneity of the group in mind (see Chapter 8). Also within each individual there can be mixings of variables originating in different “social topologies”. I have now explored the “epistemology” of Parisian slam from an external, theoretical perspective. Next, I change perspectives to that of slammers themselves.

Therapy in the truth of poetry

Sincerity – truthfulness in speaking and acting – appears as a fundamental constituent in native understanding of a “good” performance that “touches” the listeners. Many slammers say they search to find and express a truth. The multiartist Chantal Carbon, for instance, sees a connection between the most personal and the most universal. A personal truth touches others. She describes this fundamental experience as the biggest surprise when she started going to slams.

There was a certain emotion between the people who told personal things and the people who listened and who felt touched. But what’s important is that we were above the differences between people. Because finally, the more personal it is, the more general it becomes, and the more you can touch someone. If, on the contrary, you try to make a generalisation in order to defend a cause, nobody bothers because you’ve nothing to base it on (*appuies sur rien*). [...] If you base it on your experience, on your own sentiment, the more you use your own personal experience, the more the others will be touched by it, because they will feel it, because they know it’s true.

The view and understanding explicit and implicit in this quote; that the basic constituents of human experience are universal, as shared by all, and empathetically accessible for all, seems dominant, perhaps univocal, in Parisian slam poetry. As I mentioned, I have rarely, if ever, heard poems that nourish repentance or competition in memories, which according to Sarkozy and others, tear France apart. Instead, people evoke personal stories – often with a twist in the direction of *difference*. Through singularities the universal can be reached.

Difference – different language, different faith, different practice, different attire, different *savoir-vivre*, different (thus “less”) “civilisation” – has often been denied and muted under the French republican conceptualisation of “universal man”. In slam, difference seems however always rooted in a firm belief in the universal appeal and applicability to a universal human being. The specificity of this view of the human as basically universal *and* different – as singularities swerving from a universal base – becomes clearer when I, in Chapter 9, compare Parisian slam to its sister phenomenon, US American slam, where claims to authenticity are directed towards identity politics, particularly of marginalised ethnic and social categories (Aptowicz 2008; Somers-Willett 2009). In French slam – although full of foreign languages, foreign expressions, and words and stories originating elsewhere – identity is rarely, if ever expressed in identity political terms. Instead, it is personal *and* universal. I believe that in order to be (experience oneself and be accepted as) full human beings in “the land of *human* rights” (*le pays de droits de l’homme*, i.e. France), the human as foremost universal, not particular, is inalienable. However, the experiences of “the bodies of exception” have shown that the universal human is not yet universal without its singularities acknowledged.

Another central, and related, aspect in native understanding of slam poetry is how sharing your experiences in front of a listening audience can have therapeutic effects: Speech, as it engraves an experience into reality with the help of the acknowledgment of the listeners, can aid a person in reconstructing itself after a crisis. These native Parisian views on the role of sharing and listening in making life liveable and the world inhabitable again for a person who has suffered, is analogous to anthropological literature

on rituals of mourning. Nadia Seremetakis (1991) proposes an “ethics of antiphony”⁸⁵ to explain the role of the “chorus” of co-mourners in her research in Mani in Greece. In the Parisian case, the listeners “witness”, thus “integrate into reality” (in Chantal Carbon’s words again), the experience of the suffering person.

In “The Anthropology of Pain”, Veena Das (1995b) looks at the wider social and societal implications of putting words to pain. Her concern is the appropriation by the Indian state of the rights over enunciation of the painful memories from partition. She discusses the philosophical theories of pain and concludes that for a person, suffering not only destroys the sense of community with others (the world is no longer liveable), but can also form the basis for *new* constructions of community (“the beginning of a language game”, in reference to Wittgenstein, Das 1995b: 176). She develops Emile Durkheim’s analysis of the ordeals endured during initiation rites as a way of creating a moral community (1995b: 180), and asks if “pain shared collectively can be transformed to bear witness to the moral life of a community”? (1995b: 191). She calls for a “therapeutic space” in India for the reworking of personal histories (1995b: 193).

[A] public ritual of mourning, of listening, to the laments of the bereaved, and of providing a space where anger is expressed at the loss of moral community. (1995b: 193)

Such a therapeutic space “could have constituted the first step in a cleansing of the social body of a large, complicit social evil” (1995b: 193). In referring both to Wittgenstein and to Durkheim, she points to “the way in which relating to the pain of others can become witness to a moral life” (Das 1995b 195). Durkheim’s point is that individual pain must be shared and “must come to be collectively experienced” (Das 1995b: 194). In Chapter 7, I let individuals share stories of personal suffering (however with connections to wider issues of particularly “the colonial gap”). In Chapter 9, on the other hand, I address dramas on a predominantly societal level. Here, the slam phenomenon with its ethos of equal space, time and acknowledgement for all, shows a way forward in the creation of a

⁸⁵ Antiphony is a call and response way of singing, often two choirs, or in the Greek mourning ritual Seremetakis describes, between one protagonist – the bereaved – and a choir of mourners.

moral community able to redress the inequalities of the Republic. When the fluidity of slam space disaggregates distinctions from its unified social positions, the universal humanness in all its facets appears.

The creation of a moral community, i.e. a “society” with bonds of solidarity as I understand Das, takes place during slam sessions when people are able to share their pain and suffering as well as committing themselves to listening to others. While “sincerity” or “truthfulness” characterises a good slammer, an important ingredient in a good slam session is “diversity” or “a good mix”. In Chapter 6, I show how numerous contrasts play a central role in creating the dynamics of a slam session. It suffices to say here that without all kinds of variations of characteristics and qualities of the slammers, as well as in the themes they bring up, the slam session would attract neither performers nor audience. Therefore, it is vital for slam that all performances do not treat existential suffering and transform the session into a mourning ritual or something like a meeting in Alcoholics Anonymous (or Narcotics Anonymous, to be precise). Slam is at its best an art form. Nevertheless, there will always be *some* texts that explicitly take up the theme of human suffering. This makes slam into more than art, or a quite peculiar form of art, as Johann (Yo)’s definition in the first part of the introduction suggests: The social product, or process of production, itself is the manifestation of art. Furthermore, the session is an eternal return to the birth of the revolution by the Third Estate and the establishment of the National Assembly, who defied the monarch, established one vote per head and wrote the declaration of human rights. It is also, as the prominent slammer Nada will describe in Chapter 7, an art of bare necessity. Without the necessity, no art, it seems; and without art, no solution to the necessity.

Entering into the very ground of being through the techne and poiesis in poetry and the autopoietic potential in performances

While Chapter 7 explores how performing poetry can function as therapy for the most part explores what Parisian slam poetry can be about for the people who engage in it, Chapter 8 ventures further away from native theory and deeper into an anthropological

inquiry: Ritual as a means for reconstructing persons, belonging and relations.⁸⁶ Through a theory of ritual as a way of:

entering directly within the habitus and adjusting its parameters... [and a] means of reengaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being. Indeed, I suggest engaging machinically within the habitus so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements [...] The aesthetics, repetitions, careful detailing, slowing of tempo, shifting position of participants, recontextualizations, etc., are major means for readjusting the processes within life that, among many other things, permit life as it is lived to regain its uninterrupted flow. (Kapferer 2005b: 49)

In the world outside slam, the slammers might have been treated as sheep, categorised, described, stopped and searched on the basis of their dark skin or *jeune de banlieue* looks and ways of talking, or they might have been belittled or dehumanised in other ways that did not acknowledge their singular claim to universal humanness. Building on the slammers' own thoughts on teaching in workshops and on what constitutes good poetic craftsmanship in writing and performing, I show how the fullest possible relations between participants and audience on the slam ground can function like a ritual in Kapferer's sense and transform persons, perhaps even at the deepest level, – from sheep to full humans. The aesthetics of the poems – their *techne* (craftsmanship) and *poiesis*, their capacity to create and bring forth, or unconceal meaning – and the aesthetics and structure of the slam session as a whole, the everydayness of both performers and surroundings, are major means for readjusting the habitus, and with it both life and world, within the very ground of being.

The anthropologist Handelman (2004) suggests that the transformative potential in ritual is due to its ability to curve inwards, away from the socio(-political) circumstances, creating self-organisation, or *autopoiesis*, where transformation can be set in motion. Handelman and Kapferer's perspectives show how humans are able to create,

⁸⁶ Ritual, in contrast to sincerity, truth and therapy, is not a native term and I have only heard one practitioner, Pilote Le Hot, use it to describe the slam session.

to some extent, controlled conditions for recreating themselves. The controlled conditions of a slam session consist of as equal as possible access to the stage, equal time to speak, equal right to be heard and – as far as possible – equal acknowledgement in terms of attention and applause. As a whole, the session thus symbolises a coarse critique of the Republic which, according to the perspectives of “the colonial gap”, does not treat all its children equally. In Chapter 9 I reintroduce the present day circumstances of French society into ritual analysis and find that slam not only functions as a machinery of redress for understanding past experiences at the personal level, but also at the level of society, in the sense Victor Turner (1982) describes when he looks at the relationship between social dramas and performance in *From Ritual to Theatre*. If I am to take Johann’s (Yo) suggestion that slam is “very similar to the Tennis Court Oath” at the early days of the 1789 revolution seriously, the slam phenomenon is also revolutionary republican at its base, indicating ways for a new beginning for the Republic.

The chapters

Although many of the “obstacles” contributing to the eddies encountered in this thesis relate to “the colonial gap” and its means to stigmatise, muzzle and belittle, these are not the only obstacles creating the swirling counter currents of life. The therapy of speech and being listened to and acknowledged in slam space relate to the whole spectrum of the human existence. This point is important, as Parisian slam is not any kind of “minority” phenomenon. To a large extent (however politically skewed), it is the Third Estate, “the people”, who come to express themselves.

In Chapter 5, I will explore the counter currents of life in the realm of city space and the biopolitical creative resistance of city life (Negri et al 2008). In Chapter 6, I let a slam session flow and fold within the riverbanks of the slam ethos, and here I will describe a wide variety of counter currents of life and ways to create poetry and performance out of it. In Chapter 7, I explore slam as therapy in the sense of providing means and opportunities to formulate and express one’s life and struggles within a community of attentive listeners. The community of listeners qua fellow *performers-in-equal-turn* create together a greater common swirl, a “Giant’s kettle”, curving the slam session away from the main currents of everyday life, and thus creating a major force

with auto-poietic – self-organising, as Handelman (2007) calls it, or perhaps self-unconcealing, in the terminology of Heidegger – potentialities. Herein lays the force of slam to transform “the very ontological ground of being” (Kapferer 2005b: 49).

In Chapter 8, I explore slam from the perspective of ritual theory of the anthropologists Handelman and Kapferer, seeing the slam session as a dynamic field of force. This field of force is created through the craftsmanship (*techne*) and poetic creativity or unconcealment (*poiesis*) of the performers. It manifests itself in the relation between performer and the members of the audience, in “the ephemeral moments created in encounters” as Dgiz puts it, “in the fullest possible relation” the slammers Damien and Antoine (Tô) search for or in the “moment of humanity” in the words of the slammer Souleymane Diamanka. This force of being related to someone and something outside oneself is analysed by Emile Durkheim as the dependence of the individual on the community, or what the philosopher Charles Taylor (1985) calls a “public space of disclosure” where personhood forms. Taylor’s point is that the person is created in communication, not in introspection. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson holds a similar view in his theory of cybernetics, or system theory. He claims that this, and the analogous world-view of the Alcoholics Anonymous, proposes a more correct ontology-epistemology than the Cartesian dualism. Cybernetics, the AA, and the slammers recognise the individual’s relations to a larger whole – his or her alcohol dependency, fellow humans and etc. – as “complementary” not “symmetrical” or binary.

If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also continue to see the world in terms of God versus man; elite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having *both* an advanced technology *and* this strange way of looking at its world can endure. (Bateson 1972)

In chapter 9, I specifically explore how slam in words and practice addresses the crisis of the colonial gap, and how slam becomes a revolutionary republican eddy running counter to a Republic that has forgotten its 1789 ideals. I further explore the Frenchness

of the redress to the crisis through comparing notions of belonging, personhood, and community expressed in slam in France and the United States of America. I conclude the chapter by suggesting that French slam sessions actively and consciously disaggregate distinctions and dissolve unified social positions, while at the same time retaining strong notions of community and solidarity. Thus, a kind of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000) where “class in itself” has dissolved, but where bonds creating a “class for itself” – or a disorganised bundle of counter currents – are strengthened (see Chapter 5 as well).

In Chapter 10, I suggest that when the “eddie” of all the different trajectories of slam “inscribe into reality” their stories of differences and elements from elsewhere, they contribute to replacing a closed conceptualisation of belonging, persons and society with an open, relational one.

In the final chapter, I compare one binary ontology-epistemology of Europe, its cultures and identities with a relational one, “integral Europe” as described by Douglas R. Holmes (2000), versus Eric Wolf’s “relational Europe” (1997 [1982]). I conclude that the re-appropriation of space the slammers engage in described in the previous chapters and the re-appropriation of time (or history) described in the final, act on the basis of an equivalent epistemology of interrelationships and interdependencies (in time and space) to that which Wolf delineates empirically as well as theoretically in *Europe and the People without history*. Following Bateson’s argument, the slammers are engaged in promoting a more correct – and more enduring – epistemology of the world and its basic constituents.

Chapter 5 – The biopolitical space of the city

Socio-political geography of North-East Paris

Belleville from the outside

When I arrived in Paris, I told the manager of the hotel where I first stayed that I was going to rent a flat in Belleville, a neighbourhood situated two metro stops, or less than fifteen minutes by foot, to the east of the hotel in Place de la République. From earlier stays at the hotel, I knew the manager as a warm and open person, always having time for a chat with his customers. Now, his smile disappeared and he could not hide his surprise and aversion: “*Belleville! C’est foncé là-bas!*” “It’s dark (-skinned) down there!” The last time I had stayed at his hotel, I had moved on to Le Marais – the gentrified, old central neighbourhood housing many Ashkenazi Jews, gay bars and new designer shops – a move he had highly acclaimed. Apparently, “dark” Belleville was not equally suitable for me, a blond and blue-eyed young woman (soon) on her own. When he pulled himself together after the surprise, he said it would be funny if I started to speak French with a Bellevillian accent, thus again emphasising the difference between the Nordic me, and the somehow different character of Belleville.⁸⁷

What is it about “dark” Belleville? Like in most modern metropolises, the Parisian population changes across the city. In the northern and eastern direction, the skin colour turns more diverse, so do the socio-economic and ethnic appearance of people. Suits and neat skirts tend to be rarer. Belleville and its inhabitants have always had the reputation of being wild and unruly. Before the area was annexed by the city in

⁸⁷ Either it was clear that his comments were not well received or it was some sort of self-censorship at work. Later, he still wanted to discourage me from moving eastwards, but he had changed his argument; it was important to live next to a metro line that would take me directly to the place (he thought) I was going to work, because each change of lines would delay me so and so many minutes. And as I would be at a university (he thought) on the left bank of the river, line two crossing through Belleville would not be that convenient.

Hausmann's urban reconstruction in 1860-1, the exemption from taxation laws on alcohol, which applied inside Paris proper (*intra muros*), made the cabarets and dancehalls of Belleville infamous for their party atmosphere, attracting a wide variety of people.⁸⁸ It is said that at the time of the revolt of the Paris commune in 1871, no one fought as fiercely as the Bellevilloises. Now, they vote to the left, accommodate wave upon wave of immigrants and house the highest concentration of slam poetry venues.

Theme of chapter

In this chapter, I explore a question I grappled with from the moment I realised the remarkable manner that the slam phenomenon was capable of capturing, reproducing – or perhaps even articulating – the “feel” or atmosphere of northeastern Parisian street life and environment. What is it about that particular environment and what is it about slam that makes the latter such a pertinent expression of the former? First, I thought of the overt similarities, like the remarkable heterogeneity of people, the popular, laid-back informality in dress code and forms of interaction and the left-wing and republican political bent in stances, as well as remarks and topics of utterances. All were prominent features of demeanour and interaction, street art,⁸⁹ graffiti, wall posters and the general “touch” of public life in the neighbourhoods of Belleville and Ménilmontant. The landscape in Belleville and the daily life played out there manifest the (past and on-going) process of inhabitation of a certain France that can be termed *La France Métissée*: The culturally and ethnically diverse/mixed France. The everyday lived and experienced France Métissée is in stark contrast to the official version of France (white, European, with a grandiose and flawless history). A characteristic of French street scenery in general is the continued domination of small-scale, non-franchise retail outlets. In these areas, the independent bakeries, cafés and restaurants, bookshops, clothes shops and groceries are visibly owned as well as frequented by people of all origins.

⁸⁸ An interesting historical precursor of the slam session were the *goguettes*, where different people came together to sing and perform a wide variety of different genres. Just like slam, they appeared first, and became most numerous, in Belleville (Steiner 2010).

⁸⁹ The street art scene has many similar features with the slam scene as the artists re-appropriate public space for free, with no other goal than to make their art be seen, or heard, by others. Street art, like slam, also often function as a critique of the commercialisation of public space. Northeast Paris abounds of creative, original pieces of art. Examples from the time of my fieldwork can be found here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cicilie/sets/72157594370997599/> (accessed 19.10.2011).

On a more fundamental level, however, when I came across the conceptualisation of the city as the prominent site for a “biopolitical production”,⁹⁰ I realised that the similarities between slam and its place of genesis was not a question of similarities of appearances only. The articulation of environment, on the one hand, and structure of organisation and interaction in slam, on the other hand, was also an expression of deep-seated values and processes in the local environment.

This chapter is thought of as an outline to why I understand northeast Paris to be the generic home of Parisian slam. The basic processes leading to the particular form of slam concern – as I see it – the social and ethnic heterogeneity and the living history of rebellion and resistance in the area. In order to describe and explain this articulation of local environment and structure of slam, I first start with a description of the “feel” of the area, before I briefly go through the history of immigration to Belleville and the recent “gentrification”. Then, I present a phenomenology of Belleville today, built on the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s notion of the environment as a meshwork and “zone of entanglement” (2007, 2008). As I perceive Belleville, important components in the social space – cultures, places, traditions, stories, categories, groups and identities – appear without clear boundaries, as if they are fluids rather than solids. The components belong to a smooth, uncountable space of heterogeneity and becoming rather than a striated, stable and countable space (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). I here make use of the conceptualisation of social space as fluid from the philosophers of science Annemarie Mol and John Law (Mol and Law 1994). The singularities that appear from this heterogeneity lead to the theoretical discussion on the creative and resistive potential of the biopolitical space and production in the city. I further discuss how senses of locality and local belonging can be a basis for participation and democracy. The final part of the chapter describes the re-appropriation of the city space.

Exploring by leg-work – Belleville from the inside

⁹⁰ In an interview with Antonio Negri by the Paris-based architects and urban theorists Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu and Anne Querrien (Negri et al. 2008).

Smooth space is precisely that space of the smallest deviation: therefore it has no homogeneity, except between infinitely proximate points, and the linking of proximities is effected independently of any determined path. It is a space of contact, of small tactile or manual actions of contact, rather than visual space like Euclid's striated space. [...] A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities that occupy space without "counting" it and can "be explored only by legwork." They do not meet the visual condition of being observable from a point in space external to them; an example of this is the system of sounds, or even of colors, as opposed to Euclidean space. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 409)

As several weeks of warm, beautiful autumn weather followed my settling down in Ménilmontant (the neighbourhood next to Belleville with similar characteristics), I decided to discover the area by foot. Earlier, I had felt ill at ease to venture this far east in the city. I remember my French teacher in secondary school taught us that Belleville ("beautiful town") was a euphemism for a very poor and rundown area. Even twenty years later, east and north of the quickly gentrifying nightlife spot Rue Oberkampf, the trendy or touristy-picturesque cafés are (still) far apart. Instead, smoke-filled *tabac-loto-cafés* abound. The streets are not washed once a day as they are in the more chic areas (but a couple of times a week.) In addition, people seem different: Only men, and the odd middle-aged woman, hang around the counter in many of the narrow bars, whether it is noon, evening or night. Many homeless people, probably many of them *sans-papiers* (undocumented migrants), sit or sleep in the streets, sometimes alone but often in small groups. Poverty seems constantly present. The beggars are rarely drug addicts, and persons going through the rubbish bins in search of food are a common sight. Down at the boulevard, a couple of times a week, there is a very miserable market (not to be confused with the food market), where old men sell pairs of worn trousers or shoes.

The large majority of inhabitants are of course not destitute, but still quite modest and inconspicuous in their way of dressing. Perhaps it is the presence of poverty, or just the lack of affluence, that make people wear more toned down colours and plain styles

here than in the centre and further west? The exception is the (newly arrived) West African women wearing large, colourful dresses, often with a matching scarf around the head and a baby tied to their back, always in sandals. More often than not if I saw someone in high heels and skirt in this area, it was a cross-dresser, and not a woman as it most likely would have been elsewhere in the city. Many of the locals are of lower middleclass to working-class background; they are perhaps concerned about being “just normal people”, neither “bragging about”, nor visibly poor, like the self-description of Marianne Gullestad’s (1984) lower middle-class informants. Moreover, others might have noticed this local identity and dress down in order not to look like the unpopular *bobos* (“bourgeois bohemians”) entering these areas with the rapid gentrification. I will expand on this issue in the next session.

Getting used to the area as well as learning the local codes for inconspicuous dressing and behaviour helped me to feel more at ease as I moved around at various times of the day. There is a constant interaction going on in the streets, and if one does not feel at ease or even flaunts one’s uneasiness, one is more likely to provoke unpleasant incidents (Cf. Anderson 1990). People ask for directions, for change, for cigarettes and other minor things all the time. My experience is that one can easily decline, but and perhaps particularly at night, one had better do it under certain conditions. First, one should be polite. My flatmate, who was often in a hurry, told me several times how he had been yelled at and offended others after declining requests by strangers. One had better not show that one is afraid. “You’re afraid?” as Jean frequently asked me in unfamiliar places. To show fear is a political statement that publicly acknowledges the need for “law and order” policies in a climate where *insécurité* is never far away in the public debate. Moreover, we all know, like the hotel manager, the subtle connotations of immigration and *jeune de banlieue* underneath the seemingly neutral notion of “insecurity”.

In the introduction, I described how Laurent was feigning an Arab accent in order to avert trouble at our nightly walks. The slammer and rapper Dgiz had grown up nearby Belleville and lived for a large part of his life in the area. He not only had a *tête d’Arabe* (“looks of an Arab”) like Laurent said about himself, but also the stereotypical appearance of a *jeune de banlieue* (“youth from the suburb”) with a shaved head and

some hip-hop attire. Walking the streets of Belleville with him was an utterly different experience, and I started to grasp how different the city appeared to the two of us. People who would throw him a loathing glance could sigh in relief and smile at me, and vice versa; the ones putting up an aggressive stone face in front of me would even smile at him, and one stranger handed him a small lump of hash out of a car window in exchange for a cigarette.

The anthropologist David Graeber (2009) provides a funny and illuminating description of cigarette usage among political activists in his monograph on the alter-globalisation movement. Initially, he found all the bumming of cigarettes in the milieu bewildering, as he, when he was a smoker, took care not to be stuck without cigarettes. Then he realised that this lack and redistribution was a “constant willed collapse in autonomy” in order to create a

constant mobilization of feelings of need discipline, sharing, and desire. [...] One is dependent on communal good will and sharing for what one *really* desires most urgently in the world, at least at that moment. (Graeber 2009: 265, italics in original)

The streets of Belleville are not a politically conscious community like the one Graeber describes, but the brief and accidental, albeit constant interaction, not only for cigarettes, but also for all kinds of small excuses and exchanges create important threads in the social tapestry of the neighbourhood. From this perspective, an impolite decline can also mean that you decline to take part in the weaving of the local “archi-texture” with this person.

As I became better familiar with the milieu around slam, I occasionally ran into people I knew in Belleville: People who lived there, who worked there or who just hung out for a slam session or two or for socialising. However, Dgiz, who had lived in the area and been in the world of slam, music and theatre for a long time, would meet colleagues and acquaintances all the time. He revived his immense network just by strolling along; many times, he would also make appointments on his way, engaging people or being engaged for work. He was at home at the streets in Belleville, to the extent that he called

Rue de Belleville – mobile in hand – his office. Belleville and the adjacent area Ménilmontant with its still relatively cheap rent, mythic history and particular environment also accommodate a large number of artists, activists and bohemians and a prolific artistic and political scene.

“Euclidian space” is metric, three dimensional, and contains units that are determinable and countable from a point on the outside. In “smooth space”, on the other hand, there are no quantitatively determinable positions, no hierarchy and no centre. Instead, there are “rhizomatic multiplicities” ceaselessly establishing connections through their lines of flight, their clinamens. Getting to know Belleville through “legwork”, not demographics of countable and constant identities, means to engage in relations. The “trail of life” of the ethnographer does perhaps not to a very large extent “contribute to the weave and texture” of her field’s “continual coming into being” (Ingold 2007: 81). However, it makes visible the becoming and multiplicity of a fluid space. I will return to these theoretical points shortly.

Belleville as meshwork

Immigration

Poverty and a riotous spirit are probably both central to outsiders’ perception of Belleville, but there is no doubt that the number one characteristic associated with the area is immigration. When the neighbourhood is mentioned in the media, it usually concerns the many waves of immigrants, its character of melting pot or one specific migrant community (usually the Chinese). The complexity reads like a history book of world conflict and its local consequences for a country that prides itself with the title *terre d’accueil* (land of reception or welcome): Armenians came in 1918, Greeks in 1920, German and other central European Ashkenazi Jews fleeing the Third Reich in 1933, and Spaniards in 1939. This is called the “Yiddish period” by the demographer Patrick Simon, as “[s]tores, workshops, cafés, places of religious worship or assembly, political newspapers, Zionist, Bundist or communist discussion groups, common interest groups, Jewish or Armenian trade unions formed a dense and dynamic network of community organizations” (from Rolan 1962, in Simon 2000: 102-3.) While the previous waves seem

to have merged in the melting pot, the visible traits of Ashkenazi communities emerge here and there and now and then, when men in old-fashioned black coats and hats together with well-dressed small boys (with dark baseball caps) congregate for small, anonymous synagogues on the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals.

In the 1950s, many “French workers”⁹¹ moved farther out, to new public housing on the outskirts of the city or to the suburbs, giving way to Algerians and Tunisian Sephardic Jews, a period of Belleville’s history Simon calls “North African” (2000: 103). Some blocks on Boulevard de Belleville just south of Metro Belleville are still dominated by restaurants, bakeries, kosher butchers, a synagogue and other Sephardic shops. The Sabbath and Jewish festivals, particularly the Yom Kippur, are played out on the pavement with food stalls or Sukkoths (booths of straw or bamboo), and armed police often guard the entrance to the synagogue. Unlike the Ashkenazi, the Sephardic Jews do not stand out in the local community (except the few who wear the Kippah for the Sabbath and festivals). The elderly men and women sitting on benches on this part of the boulevard often speak Arabic (not Hebrew), and with regard to the youth I, at least, would not notice any difference.

While the Jewish commerce is concentrated on the east side of this stretch of the boulevard, Maghrebi Islamic book- and clothes shops dominate the west side of the same stretch. In addition, Maghrebis run a large part of the bakeries in this part of the city, as well as many other small enterprises. A handful of these bakeries specialise in North African cakes, some sell only French goods, while many have a few North African specialities in addition to the French assortment.

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese population has increased in Belleville. Tens of thousands, maybe as many as 120 000 in 2004, have settled in a small area just north of metro Belleville. Officially, there are 40 000 Chinese in France, making it the largest population in Europe, but the real number is estimated to be somewhere between 500 000

⁹¹ The category “French workers”, I suppose also includes the next generation of the previous waves of immigrants. The Southern European refugees and immigrants of the interwar period were victims to harsh but quickly waning racism and discrimination. Between 1954 and 1982, the number of French citizens fell with one half “(from 45263 to 24654), whereas the number of foreigners doubled (from 4696 to 9470)” (Simon 2000: 103).

and 700 000.⁹² In Belleville, the Chinese make up a large part of the *sans-papiers* population. The first East Asians to arrive were refugees from former Indochina who chose Belleville and Rue de Crimée (where the slammer Ucoc's parents have a Cambodian restaurant) after the Chinese area in the south of Paris (13th arrondissement) became too crowded. From the mid 1980s a chain migration of people from Wenzhou in Southeast China started, now making up 85 percent of the Chinese population in Belleville. Lastly, poorer people from Dongbei in the Northeast with fewer business and family connections have started settling. The relatively recent arrival, high number, chain migration and strong ties can perhaps partly account for why this community seemed, in 2007 at least,⁹³ less integrated in the social fabric than the other communities. They are however strongly present in local business and in the streets, and with posters and small advertisements in Chinese posted on the walls in the main roads. At the time of my fieldwork, there were to my knowledge not yet any slammers of Chinese background from Belleville.

Bobos, gentrification in Belleville and slam

A frequently asked question from people familiar with Belleville concerns how the “rapid gentrification” of the area affects the slam scene. I will present a couple of viewpoints I find significant for my further discussion, rather than engage in the discussion about to what extent Belleville is gentrifying. As in many inner city working-class areas around the world, the sociological composition of Belleville is changing, as the working-class population is decreasing and the middleclass, intellectuals and artists are on the rise. The housing prices have historically been lowest in the north and northeast of Paris, so now it is here they are rising the fastest. The sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (2004), who have written numerous books on the sociology of Parisian habitation patterns, claim that there is a limit to gentrification in these north eastern arrondissements as they follow the law of social housing and retain (at least) 20% for that purpose. Thus, the two sociologists predict that a high level of social housing will stop the gentrification

⁹² Sources: Humanité 12/06/2004 and 26/04/2007. France also has the largest black, Jewish and Muslim populations in Europe.

⁹³ Anne Steiner, whose study of the numerous Bellevillian cafés is more recent than mine, claim however that the East Asians as well are clients on the neighbourhood cafés, particularly the ones with outdoors seating on the pavement, and flipper and billiards indoors (Steiner 2010: 16).

at a certain level because many from the middleclass hesitate to let their children go to schools classified as *Zone Education Prioritaire* (which is a status granting some extra support for schools where a certain percentage of pupils are considered of coming from a disadvantaged background).

Related to the gentrification, are the “bourgeois bohemians”, the *bobos*. Although I never met anyone who associated him or herself with it, I quickly became familiar with the term after I moved into the area. One reason for their unpopularity is probably the exorbitant housing prices of the formerly relatively cheap areas. Bourdieu’s *Distinction* offers another reason. Here, Bourdieu seems to have spotted the advent or predecessors of the bobos in his description of the new petit bourgeoisie. Both are concerned with the “art of living” and the access to cultural goods. They can therefore only live in Paris, not the suburbs (1984: 363), and they settle in the most affordable areas. They work in presentation and representation, in the “new ‘substitution’ industry, which sells fine words instead of things to those who cannot afford the things but are willing to settle for words” (Bourdieu 1984: 365). In that respect, they are the vanguards of the capitalist society of spectacle as formulated by The Situationists, where people are perceived as increasingly pacified by the commercialisation and marketing of relations and everyday life. Although I have never heard a direct reference to the Situationists in slam, similar attitudes are frequently expressed in poems, as well as implicitly in terms of modest or plain dressing and anti-consumerist stances. This makes me conclude that to the extent there exists a dichotomised “other” – however implicit – in the slam milieu (except Sarkozy), it might perhaps be the bobos.

The sociologist Anne Steiner, who has written a book on the cafés of Belleville, has a different take on the issue of gentrification and bobos. She criticises the pejorative meanings of the term bobo in France in general and the neighbourhood of Belleville in particular for several reasons: The newly arrived inhabitants do according to her not squeeze out the more ancient ones (which is the most common critique of gentrification), rather they help limit their eviction through mobilising and invigorating their local neighbourhood. Second, Steiner points out that public spaces – like the cafés – are still used by people of all backgrounds, even the newly arrived Chinese. Cafés are perhaps increasingly mixed, as young Kabyles, for instance, with more “cultural capital” (due to

schooling and experience) than their older relatives take over the family business and start up with concerts, poetry evenings and expositions⁹⁴ (Steiner 2010: 17). Third, Steiner judges the term bobo to often be used in political discourse in order to disparage the stance of the “culturally endowed, *a priori* non-racist and ecologically sensible” new settlers in old working-class areas (2010: 17, my translation).

Interestingly, this analysis by Steiner, a sociologist who has written several books political movements from extreme leftist (Rote Armé Fraction) to anarchist, resembles the anthropologist David Graeber’s speculation around the particular socio-economic composition of certain activist milieus. Graeber sees certain joint artistic and political milieus as particular meeting places between downwardly mobile children of the middleclass rebelling against what they see as alienation in their parents’ generation and upwardly mobile children who rebel against oppression (2009: 254-6). This junction of different people is typical within bohemian ways of life, he writes. He traces this trend back to the 19th century bohemia in Paris (“not only full of working-class intellectuals and self-taught eccentrics, but outright revolutionaries” (2009: 254)), to hippies in the 1960s and later the punks. The characteristics of people and lifestyles Graeber finds in the alter-globalisation milieu resemble, to some extent, the general mixing of people in Belleville and largely to that of the northeast Parisian slam poetry milieu.

To the question whether slam changes with the possible gentrification of Belleville, I will thus conclude that I believe, like Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (2004) claim, that there is proof to the process in the area primarily due to the housing policies which maintains a high percentage of low income households. Furthermore, I certainly agree with Steiner who argues that the socio-economic development of the area contributes to more, rather than less, heterogeneity. The composite nature of local accommodation, and the area’s lasting – and increasing – attraction to various kinds of people, contributes to a lasting composite character of the population. I believe this increasing socio-economic and cultural (i.e. in terms of “cultural capital”) heterogeneity of the area is reflected in the slam milieu as well, however at least as much due to the success of Grand Corps Malade. As I reported in the methodology part, the success of his

⁹⁴ The owner of Xango, which I describe in Chapter 6, is a prototype of Steiner’s example. Xango is situated in Goutte d’Or, a historically similar neighbourhood to Belleville.

debut album attracted a wider range of participants to slam. Many perceived this as negative for the ethos of slam (as I will return to in subsequent chapters). Nevertheless, Ucoc and Dgiz in particular, appreciated the diversity this created. Ucoc for instance remarked that he almost felt more at home in slam now with the increased influx of slammers with middleclass background.

Mosaic or meshwork? Unboundedness and fluidity

Watching people from a café at busy crossroads like the ones outside the metro stations of Ménilmontant or Belleville, I get the sense that not only is the whole world represented, but it is also represented in every – or almost – combination thinkable. There you have the African mother in flip-flops and a colourful dress and headdress, carrying her baby in a shawl on her back, and you have the sharply dressed black executive. You have Chinese, whites, Jews and Arabs in all variations. The unboundedness, yet elements of stark otherness, in this diversity where ethnic difference lives side by side with the openness of the republican universalistic ideals, wakes a utopian urge in me: Embracing, or at least accepting, difference without sealing its ethnic boundaries seems like the perfect mix of the recognition of multiculturalism and the emancipatory freedom of republicanism.

Nevertheless – not to forget – you also have the blatant racism in the same streets. The woman who refuses the Arab man with his arms full of suits from the dry cleaner to sit down on the free seat next to her (but offering me the same seat as I rise for the man). This echoes the arrogant, closed-faced, incomprehension of the clerk in reply to the well-spoken but Arabic-accented man, (and the same face softening, smiling, in full understanding of every word of my stuttering French.)

Belleville has been described as a *mosaic* of various cultures, with ethnic markers delineating the boundaries between groups and categories and their shops and cafés (Simon 2000). “This is Belleville! And I love it!” Dgiz said as we walked down the Boulevard de la Villette.⁹⁵ His outstretched arms embraced the meeting-point of two

⁹⁵ Boulevard de la Villette comes from the north and changes its name to Boulevard de Belleville at metro station Belleville. At metro Ménilmontant it changes name again to Boulevard de Ménilmontant, which runs all the way to metro Philippe Auguste where it becomes Boulevard de Charonne which ends just beside Place de la Nation. I will look closer at the boulevard later in this chapter.

façades, one inhabited by a Chinese supermarket with its characteristic smell of durian, the other a quite trendy café where they often play English Drum and bass, Trip hop and the like. He could have chosen any such neighbouring buildings along this stretch of the street, where unpretentious North African and Chinese and Indochinese restaurants, Maghrebi bakeries, synagogues, mosques, churches, religious shops displaying Qurans, hijabs and other Islamic attire, the republican school with its freedom, equality and solidarity-motto, the Tricolour and frescos of Enlightenment philosophers on its façade all stand side by side.

My impression, however, is not that of a mosaic with clear boundaries. Except for a few bars dominated by middle- to old-aged Maghrebi males (where they do not even serve the characteristic North African mint tea, only alcohol it seems), most places are a true mix of people and traditions (see Steiner 2010 for a similar assessment). Everyone goes to all the restaurants, bakeries and shops, and the republican façades of the schools of Belleville are decorated with banners opposing the deportation of undocumented immigrant children. Just as the republican national tradition proclaims France as a “welcoming soil” (*terre d’accueil*), the streets and houses of the neighbourhood have incorporated waves of immigrants for centuries. These newcomers have in turn appropriated the space through their shopping, socialising and living practices. Lived life and social practice weave their patterns into the “archi-texture” (Lefebvre 1991: 118) of the environment (Ingold 2007: 80-81). While a static view on objects and symbols might turn Belleville into a mosaic, a *meshwork* (Ingold 2007) comes into light if we look at movements and action.

The inhabitant is rather one who participates from within the very process of the world’s continual coming into being and who, in laying a trail of life, contributes to its weave and texture. (Ingold 2007: 81)

People of all backgrounds lay their different trails along each other’s paths, through each other’s histories and traditions in an intricate “zone of entanglement” (Ingold 2007; 2008), as they interact in each other’s spaces. And nowhere is that more prevalent than in slam space, which belongs to no one and everyone – and where, as I will show in Chapter

8, certain practitioners, like Souleymane Diamanka, describes themselves as “inhabitant of nowhere, originating from everywhere”.

Ingold emphasises that inhabitants *make* places, even in the planned and built environment of the metropolis.

Yet the structures that confine, channel and contain are not immutable. They are ceaselessly eroded by the tactical manoeuvring of inhabitants whose ‘wandering lines’ (*lignes d’erre*) or ‘efficacious meanderings’ – in de Certeau’s words (1984: xviii) – undercut the strategic designs of society’s master-builders [...] Indeed nothing can escape the tentacles of the meshwork of inhabitation as its every-extending lines probe every crack or crevice that might potentially afford growth and movement. Life will not be contained, but rather threads its way through the world. (Ingold 2007: 103)

Ingold has probably mostly physical confinements, channels and containers in mind, but the growth and movement of human tactical manoeuvring are equally present in the realms of the mind. As Eric Wolf points out in the foreword to *Europe and the People without History*: “social sciences [...] straddle two realities: the reality of the natural world and its human transformations [...] and the reality of schemata of organized knowledge and symbolic operations learned and communicated among human beings” (Wolf 1997: xiv). In the streets in Belleville, human difference is qualitative and in becoming; furthermore it exceeds the mental schemata of “universal man” of Republicanism as well as of multiculturalist group confinements. I suggest that what appears – in the busy streets of Belleville as well as at slam sessions – are spaces for singularities exceeding the bounded binaries of identity categories.

The way similarities and difference appears in Belleville exhibits the characteristics of what the philosophers of science Annemarie Mol and John Law term *fluid space* (Mol and Law 1994): Cultures, places, traditions, stories, categories, groups and identities lack clear boundaries. They mix in various ways, emerging in continuums. The connections between them and the ways they influence each other alter. Simultaneously with the fluidity of characteristics, however, dichotomies and clear

boundaries exist, as fluid space coexists with the binary social space of clear demarcation between homogenous insides. Slam is capable of capturing these blurred boundaries between distinctions in Belleville, and the intricate mixing between people, their trajectories and their stories.

There is however a further dimension of shared characteristics between slam space and the northeastern Parisian cityscape, springing to a large degree out of the meshwork of differences, but also somewhat of Belleville's rebellious history. To capture the essence of this phenomenon, I will make a theoretical detour into the notion of biopolitics and its relationship to democracy.

Biopolitics, the city and democracy

It is in the city that biopower (the Foucaultian notion which entails governmentality techniques for controlling, regulating and subjugating populations and bodies) can be sensed the strongest, so it is here it creates the strongest resistance. In the conversation "What makes a biopolitical space?"⁹⁶ Negri discusses the city as a place for contestation, resistance and protest with the Paris based architects and urban theorists Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu and Anne Querrien.⁹⁷ In Negri's terminology, people can actively place themselves on the resistance side of the "biopolitical diagonal":

The biopolitical diagram is the space in which the reproduction of organised life (social, political) in all its dimensions is controlled, captured, and exploited – this has to do with the circulation of money, police presence, the normalisation of life forms, the exploitation of productivity, repression, the reining in of subjectivities. In the face of this, there is what I call a "political diagonal", in other words the relation that one has with these power relations, and which one cannot but have. The problem is to know what side you are on:

⁹⁶ <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html> (accessed 02.05.2008) In the French title, the word event (*événement*) is also included. Perhaps this is not included in English because the English word "space" already includes the notion of event, that action is taking place there.

⁹⁷ I discovered that the architects Petcou and Petrescu in fact were – at the time this discussion took place – engaged in a small-scale garden project engaging the locals to grow small plots of land in the La Chapelle neighbourhood in North Paris, called "Ecobox". As they refer to in the discussion, this project had developed into other grass-root activities, – including a slam session hosted by Ecce who will appear in the slam session described in the following chapter.

on the side of the power of life that resists, or on the side of its biopolitical exploitation. What is at stake in the city often takes shape in the struggle to re-appropriate a set of services essential to living: housing; water, gas and electricity supply; telephone services; access to knowledge and so on. (Negri in Negri et al 2008: 2, brackets in original)

In Northeast Paris, the visible and palpable struggles do not so much concern essential services, except for the rights and needs of undocumented immigrants and homeless people. Furthermore, even more than access to knowledge, the objectives for a plethora of small-scale organisations, artists' collectives and initiatives seem to be in various creative ways to promote communal space and ways of life free from "the society of spectacle" and the market forces that transform more and more relations into commodities. A significant trait of these struggles for a freer life in Belleville is that they do not shield themselves off in autonomous squats⁹⁸ or zones like Christiania in Copenhagen, but form part of "an exodus that does not seek an 'outside' of power, but which affirms the refusal of power, freedom in the face of power" (Negri et al. 2008).

Negri distinguishes between two sides of biopower (in contrast to Foucault, who only used the term biopower rather than biopolitics). On the one hand, there is a controlling, exploitative form; on the other hand, there is a resistive and creative aspect. A "biopolitical diagonal" separates the two. Negri spells this distinction out more clearly in another interview where he uses the Italian *biopotere* to describe the "dominion over life" and *biopotenza* as "the potentiality of constituent power" (Casario and Negri 2004). He describes the former as "power that creates the bios, [...] that tries alternately either to determine or to annul life, that posits itself as power against life". The latter, *biopotenza*, on the other hand, is "bio that creates life" (Casario and Negri 2004). This "potency" can perhaps be likened to the bringing forth or unconcealment of *poiesis*.

In *Commonwealth*, which Negri published with Michael Hardt in 2009, they expand on the potential, creative aspects of biopolitics and how it connects to the city. They claim, "the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial

⁹⁸ Parisian squats, of which there are several in Belleville, usually house a large number of artists and studios. They often invite outsiders to "open door" events.

working class” (Hardt and Negri 2009: 250). “Multitude” is to be understood as an “internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity [...] but on what it has in common” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 100). The multitude is thus composed of singularities with irreducible differences that mobilise what it shares in common through biopolitical production (Hardt and Negri 2004: 101). The model of the multitude, as that of the gathering in slam, I suggest, consists of “becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 398). It carries a potential or potency for further becoming and other constellations that do not disappear when the singularities combine into larger constellations for the purpose of particular mobilisations. Similarity, the “problematic” model of the multitude is concerned with events, not essence (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 399) and consists of material-forces “laden with singularities”, not of a “form that organizes matter and matter prepared for the form” (2004: 407). The individuals come together for particular purposes, creating unique events (haecceities), or “ephemeral moments of encounter”.

The city epitomises encounters between singularities, “the unpredictable [...] encounter with alterity” (Hardt and Negri 2009: 252). While the factory was the site for production and internal encounters and organisation of workers, the city is the site for biopolitical production of the sharing of resources, communication, exchange of goods and ideas (2009: 250). The Greek concept of polis, Hardt and Negri write, is defined as “the place where encounters among singularities are organized politically” (2009: 254). City life can therefore spark production of a “common wealth”, through encounters between singularities, or conversely, people can seclude themselves:

The great wealth of the metropolis is revealed when the felicitous encounter results in a new production of the common – when, for instance, people communicate their different knowledges, different capacities to form cooperatively something new. [...] It is not easy to form with others a new relationship that promotes communication and cooperation, that creates a new, stronger social body and generates a more joyful common life. [...] Often, in fact, since so many chance encounters are harmful, residents of the

metropolis close themselves off to avoid encounters with others, walk silently past without seeing one another, erecting invisible walls in a common space, hardened to contact. (Hardt and Negri 2009: 254-5)

To display fear in public space, as I discussed in Chapter 1, is thus not only to concede to the right-wing political paradigm of *insécurité*. It also erects “invisible walls in common space” and hinders encounters which lay at the heart of the weaving of the social fabric and the production of common wealth.

In the discussion with Negri, the architects Petcou and Petrescu (Negri et al 2008) introduce the notion of “biopolitical space” as a space where inhabitants can meet and reshape everyday life in small-scale practices. In their architectural activism, it is important that the persons who sense the biopolitical repression and subjugation can develop ways, events and spaces where they can confront the subjugation themselves, instead of being represented by others. I understand the position as similar to that of Veena Das when she warns against the danger of appropriating the voices of the victims when speaking on their behalf and consequently “create legitimacy for the appropriators” (1995b: 191). Das’s position is again similar to that of Alain Bertho when he points out how public and professional commentators reduce the voice of rioters to “symptoms” and “warnings” instead of listening to what they in fact are saying (2009: 39), thus muting an already muted part of the population even further. Petcou exemplifies how this process of appropriation of muted voices can be reversed:

Through their implication and by taking up an activity (cinema, gardening, music, parties), they create positions, roles, subjectivities that they build via a process of mutual aggregation. Via inter-subjectivity, they get to the point where they create collective relationships. [...] You cannot produce existential spaces in movements that are too agitated, so you must unite the conditions of heterogenesis, which is what we define as “alterology”. When you let the other self-manifest and build his or her subjectivity, there is less violence, more listening, and more reciprocity. [...] It is difficult to be in this

alterology, because for most part capitalism emphasizes a logic of individualism. (Petcou in Negri et al 2008: 3)

Resistance, self-reinvention and the building of community go hand in hand, as also the *biopotere* of subjectivisation works on all levels. Uniting “the conditions of heterogenesis”, or “alterology”, I propose can be seen as similar to what I have described as meshwork where similarities and differences appear in continuums, rather than in bounded, dichotomous units. In “alterology”, each person is allowed to develop and weave his or her thread in the zone of entanglement. “Ecobox”, the garden project of Petcou and Petrescu in Barbés in Northern Paris has developed – among other things – a regular slam session. It is almost as if Petcou here describes the ethos of a session, when he explains the conditions of heterogeneis, alterology: By providing a framework for the other to “self-manifest and build his or her subjectivity, there is less violence, more listening, and more reciprocity.” In the next chapter, I will describe in detail the “alterology” of slam where freedom is balanced with respect when each participant is given time and space to speak and be heard.

Negri calls the biopolitical struggle “real” and “utopian” at the same time. It is real because it faces power, but utopian because it tries to make a leap in direction “not only of solidarity, but also of democracy” (Negri et al 2008: 5).

I am fully convinced that new forms of production, communication, and circulation of languages and knowledge are of enormous help in making the affective elements – central to the new “associations” – work. We are, today, in a biopolitical context of immaterial work (with an intellectual and affective component), a context in which what was considered “individual” is rethought as “singularity” in a flow of plural and different singularities that construct relations and create a new “commons”. This is not the old superstructure, it is a material base in which each singularity is inserted while remaining open to the possibility of new being, new languages, new relations and forms of life, new value. (Negri in Negri et al 2008: 6)

New “commons” that are in becoming with open horizons, and which maintain and develop heterogeneity and the potential for rearrangements and continuous becoming. Commons are in continuous creation through relations. Relations are built through sharing and communicating, a process to which the “affective elements” are central. I will discuss this in depth in Chapter 8, “*Les mots sont des vêtements de l’émotion*: How slam animates at the deepest level with the help of emotions, words and *poiesis*”. Negri ends the discussion by defining democracy as “the construction of shared conflictual and projectual dimensions, it is to come together, to created the common through difference. It is a capacity to work in common” (Negri in Negri et al 2008: 8). In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri proclaim that the “multitude” (i.e. the “singularities with irreducible differences who mobilises what it shares” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 101)) “is the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone” (2004: 100). In Chapter 10, I will demonstrate why the ethos and practice of slam are capable of realising reconciliations of the social drama France has lived through the last decades. Here, I will elaborate further on Johann’s (Yo) point that the slam session is like the utopian democratic Tennis Court Oath in the early days of the Revolution.

Belleville multitude

City divided after Haussmann: Northeast as popular and leftwing

An obvious difference between, on the one hand, the north and northeast of Paris and, on the other, the west and southwest, is the difference in wealth and political affinities. The population in the latter part is richer, more bourgeois and votes to the right. Paris has been a divided city in political and socio-economical terms since the large-scale restructuring by prefect Haussmann under Napoleon III in 1860–61. A number of workers and employees were ousted from the city centre, where they had lived in the same neighbourhoods, and even buildings, as their employers, and relocated to the surrounding areas that had just been annexed by the city. It is in these relatively newly annexed Parisian arrondissements we find the overwhelming majority of venues where the slam sessions take place (to some extent in the 13th in the south, but particularly in the 18th in

the north, and the 19th and 20th in the northeast. The remaining venues are in the outskirts of the 10th and 11th, bordering the outlying northeastern arrondissements).

Many urban and social theorists have tried to account for the changes to urban life, experience and identity the Haussmann urban renewal initiated. In *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*, the Chicago-based sociologist Roger V. Gould (1995) claims that a local identity connected to neighbourhood – rather than class – developed between the two insurrections. He discusses two⁹⁹ different interpretations of the nature of mobilisation for the Paris Commune (in 1871): A structural Marxist view argued by the geographer David Harvey and a “humanist view in the Marxist vein” built on the writings of the philosopher Henri Lefebvre and the sociologist Manuel Castells (Gould 1995: 69). According to Gould, Harvey claims that the restructuring of the city created a loyalty to a combination of class and community in the outskirts of the city in opposition to the spectacle of money in the *grands boulevards* and the bourgeois centre (1995: 79). Lefebvre and Castells on the other hand highlight a sense of loss of community that had existed in the city centre as the source of the uprising (1995: 80). The rest of Gould’s book convincingly shows how “the humanist view underestimates the degree to which outlying areas were communities in their own right, while the structural view is wrong to portray social life in these neighborhoods as class-homogenous” (1995: 81).

Much of Gould’s description and analysis resembles the constitution, as well as the construction of community in the slam sessions, and their local communities. The sessions are far from homogenous in terms of neither class, ethnicity and age, bringing with it inside the lack of boundaries – if not the elements of stark otherness – of the outside neighbourhood. In line with Harvey and contrary to Gould, however, a political opposition, perhaps of some kind of class *solidarity*, if not directly stemming from class *belonging*, is often sensed in the soirées and neighbourhood. The soirees are far more heterogeneous in terms of social class than in terms of class solidarity, thus perhaps constituting a curious example of a group of people being a “class for itself” without being a “class in itself”. This opposition expresses itself as a strong anti-Sarkozy

⁹⁹ To be precise, three interpretations, but Gould quickly dismisses what he terms “the liberal view” for seeing no connection between the Haussmann restructuring and the Commune (1995: 70).

sentiment, hostility towards party politics, particularly the larger parties, explicit and implicit rejections of consumerism and commercialism in general and in the music business in particular, an anti-trendy, down-to-earth way of dressing among many (particularly the younger half) and *constant* reminders of connections with the rest of the world. The latter is also strongly present in the Bellevillian meshwork, while the other characteristics I would deem fairly present in the neighbourhoods where the slam sessions are situated.

Production of locality and participant identities

According to Gould (1995), local identity created in opposition to the state¹⁰⁰ and its local representatives (personated in the local police officer) formed the basis on which the adherence and recruiting to the Paris Commune in 1871 took place. He calls this basis of recruitment a *participant identity*, an identity that spurs to action. Perhaps this participant and mobilising identity can be likened to Hardt and Negri's definition of the "multitude", which is equally heterogeneous ("singularities with irreducible differences") like the population Gould describes, and mobilises democratically around a common goal: the opposition to the state. As a sociologist working with the past, Gould does not have much material to build an analysis of the process of creating such a "participant identity". Neither is it his main point. For him, it suffices to say that the state representative (the police) in the public political meetings¹⁰¹ flourishing at that time became a symbol of everything that was negative about the state.

How experience and sentiment connected to locality are constructed, is on the other hand the main issue in Arjun Appadurai's "The Production of Locality" (1996). By locality, Appadurai means a "structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of situated community" (1996: 189), which is usually unwittingly produced, represented and reproduced hand in hand with the production of local subjects (1996:

¹⁰⁰ The state is the principal enemy in Alain Bertho's (2009) analysis of contemporary riots as well. Parisian slam sessions are in many ways *organised* as a critique of the unequal practices of the states, and a few slam texts can be read – implicitly or explicitly – as directed against the state.

¹⁰¹ Another kind of meeting that flourished at the time of the Commune was the *goguettes*, singing and performance competitions. The sociologist Anne Steiner (2010) points out that the police watched them closely as they represented places of free speech and popular creativity attracting more and more socialists and anarchists among its varied participants. The author of the Internationale, Eugène Pottier for instance, was an eager participant at the *goguettes*.

185). Both locality and local subjects are thus a property of social life or the result of a historical and dialectical relationship with the contexts of neighbourhood as ecological, social and cosmological terrains (1996: 183). One of Appadurai's main points is that the production of locality is increasingly a struggle, of which he names three dimensions: First, "the efforts of the modern nation-state to define all neighborhoods under the sign of its forms of allegiance and affiliation". The second dimension is a "growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity, and collective social movement". The third aspect is "the steady erosion, principally due to the force and form of electronic mediation, of the relationship between spatial and virtual neighborhoods" (Appadurai 1996: 189). All three dimensions of struggle are relevant in Belleville and the local activity of slam, and I will discuss them one by one.

Although biopower is not the direct scope of Appadurai's essay, Negri's notion of the "biopolitical diagonal" and the relations one has to the forces of governmentality (Negri et al 2008), is of relevance in the first dimension of struggle. Of similar relevance is Ingold's conceptualisation (from de Certeau) of the "tactical manoeuvring of inhabitants whose 'wandering lines' or 'efficacious meanderings [...]' undercut the strategic designs of society's master-builders" (Ingold 2007: 103). The struggle against the efforts of the state to shape locality and local subjects in its own image, is however not new in Belleville and Northeast Paris. The insurgent identities of the Paris Commune were, according to Roger V. Gould, predominantly a result of the struggle against the presence and efforts of the state. In the next section, I will return to the republican, stately attempts to put its mark on the space of the capital, and how the inhabitants wanders and meanders to undercut the strategic designs.

The second dimension is a struggle against the disjuncture between "territory," forms of belonging and identification ("subjectivity") and collective forms of mobilisation (Appadurai 1996: 189). I have already mentioned how the heterogeneity of singularities and the creative and resistive biopolitical space of the metropolitan Bellvillian streets are brought into and amplified within fluid slam space. Amplified into – for ephemeral moments perhaps – a "multitude" of singularities or "a class for itself" playing out the heterogeneity, flux and fluidity of the neighbourhoods. In the next section, I will give some examples of the re-appropriation of stately space in Northeast

Paris connected to these characteristics. It is, according to Appadurai, in everyday action and rites de passage that local subjectivity and locality are simultaneously produced; thus in the collective act of re-appropriating local territory, a local subjectivity is simultaneously reinforced.

The third dimension of struggle concerns the relationship between virtual and spatial neighbourhoods. Appadurai's article was originally published in 1993, and much Internet research since that time has shown that electronic communication strengthens rather than weakens local identity and local networks. The more decentred the possibility for publishing and promoting on the Internet becomes, the more possibilities are developed for democratic and decentred creativity, at least that is what seems the case for the slam phenomenon. In the slam milieu, each individual slammer has now access to his or her own channel of publication through first MySpace then Facebook, without having to go through the handful of websites that existed before the social media explosion. Instead of centring round a few pivotal figures and their moderation of discussion forums, now each person becomes a node in the extremely interconnected entanglement. Each of their publications initiates threads of commentaries from the vast number of personal and professional Facebook friends (who also write comments and invitations to events directly on the wall of their friends). The publications – photos, promotions of events and comments – span geographically from the local neighbourhood of the event, to the far away foreign venues of a tour, as well as various delocalised expressions. The way the local and the far away are intertwined on the Facebook pages, resembles similar entanglements of the near and the distant on the streets of Belleville as well as at the slam sessions.

Among some recent examples from Facebook at the time of writing, the slammer Hocine Ben wrote, the 17th of October 2011, that he will,

at 6 p.m., be in front of cinema Rex, bd Bonne-Nouvelle (metro bonne-nouvelle) for a march to the saint-michel bridge, in order to demonstrate against the curfew of our dear racist state!

The 17 October 1961, as I described in the theoretical introduction, was the night the French police massacred several hundred peaceful demonstrators and threw their bodies into the Seine. Forty-five people had clicked “like” on Hocine’s publication and six had commented for the most part that they would have liked to join him. A person identified as Hocine’s brother had written a tenline comment in the memory of their uncles who survived the massacre, how they had recounted the events to their nephews and shown them the places at the bridges of Saint-Michel and Neuilly:

They showed no hatred against the French, and I would appreciate if we also thought about them, all the French, political activists or not, revolted by the repression perpetrated in their name and who saved the honour of their country in helping or hiding the victims of [police chief] Papon. I’m sure that [uncle] would have appreciated that we also talked about these “just” ones.

Six people, including Hocine, had clicked “like” on this comment. In addition, on that date, Hocine and another person published poems. Both received comments, including a long passage from a girl who had used the occasion to talk to her father about what he and her grandfather experienced the day of the massacre in 1961. Finally returning to Appadurai’s dimension of struggle: All longer accounts of the 17 October on Facebook contained place names, and the memory of the massacre itself is strongly connected to places in Paris and its shantytowns (*bidonvilles*) and banlieues. Slammers, at least, clearly use the Internet to maintain and reinforce foremost their local networks.

Appadurai makes an important methodological point when he argues that the production of ethnographic knowledge appears isomorphic to the local production of locality and local subjectivity, as both obfuscate the very production process.

Drawn into the very localization they seek to document, most ethnographic descriptions have taken locality as ground not figure, recognizing neither its fragility nor its ethos *as a property of social life*. This produces an unproblematized collaboration with the sense of inertia on which locality, as a

structure of feeling, centrally relies. (Appadurai 1996: 182, emphasis in original)

Both ethnographer and locals ignore the close links between subjectivity and locality as well as the constructedness of both. Before I end this chapter with a section describing how re-appropriating space in Northeast Paris creates Belleville as a locality as well as senses of belonging and identification, I will take a detour in order to explore the making of belonging and locality. In the short article “The stranger”, the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1944) poignantly describes how a feeling of being at home is created for the very first time, before it quickly turns inert and taken-for-granted. Gradually, through noticing the movements and attitudes of the locals around him, the stranger adapts to the local ways of moving his body and effectuating the daily tasks.

Gradually, I learned not to wear brightly coloured or conspicuous clothes, jump with surprise when people addressed me or excused themselves before passing me on the narrow pavement. Moreover, I learned to greet the fruit vendor and waiters at the local café when I passed by, always greet the vendor when entering any kind of shop, and always say good bye and a litany of “thank you” and “have a nice day”, particularly when leaving the bakeries. Not to mention, I learned the appropriate gendered behaviour. All these small acts of interaction weave the tissue of the social fabric, as I argued in the example of the bumming of cigarettes above. My impression is that such practices are ingrained in the local identity of many people of the area that they have time for such small encounters. Slam, as I will show in later chapters, is built around the construction of relations. The practitioners are highly self-conscious of this aspect of slam, talking about it in terms ranging from the simple action of getting together instead of watching television alone at home, to the goal of the artist to release the “fullest possible relation” with the listeners, or the magical “ephemeral moments” that encounters can spark.

In a phenomenology of the streets of Northeast Paris, one notices how certain behaviour is (en)skilled especially on occasions when one does not master it: A mastery I never gained was how to be at ease at the biweekly local food- and vegetable markets along the boulevard. The market has practically everything eatable, from nicely arranged fruits and vegetables of all kinds, to fresh fish and meat, fresh pasta of incredible quality,

cheese, flowers and more. On market days, one could see people in the neighbourhood come and go with their trolleys; the abundance and vibrancy of the market is something many people absolutely love, including me, but at the same time, it reminded me of my partial belonging. Of course it is always possible to purchase the food one wants (except fish and meat, which definitely needs proficiency), but not with ease, a feeling of mastering the situation and of being-at-home. Not only is it a question of *moving* graciously, politely as well as firmly enough in the crowd of people of all ages, from toddlers in prams (smaller children are usually carried on the back or chest) to elderly with sticks or in wheelchairs, and getting the attention of the right merchants when it rightfully is your turn. One also needs to negotiate with grace, politeness and firmness verbally, and not only when one makes a purchase, but when one is offered a mandarin, sung loudly to, made an offer. These huge biweekly markets put their stamp on local life, and many locals do their shopping at this market, as the quality is excellent and the prices lower than at the supermarket. I noticed that as long as I did not feel at ease with the codes here, I did not really feel like a local.¹⁰²

Laurent, whom I presented in the Introduction, held in high regard the importance of knowing one's neighbourhood. He also watched the local life and interaction with interest and in detail and liked to talk about what he saw. At a market in a similar area to Belleville, behind Montmartre in the 18th arrondissement where he lived, he told me how a Chinese woman with minimal knowledge of French stood waiting and refused to accept a large amount of grapes for one Euro, until the seller finally suggested to lower the price to 80 centimes. She mastered the codes, he said, without knowing a word of the local language.

All these local ways of going about the daily life produce locality, in Appadurai's sense. Along the boulevard from Belleville and down to Charonne, the biweekly markets produce a strong sense of an extremely heterogeneous society woven by a popular, informal, humorous, slightly cheeky way of constant interaction. For the former stranger, according to Schutz (1944), the increasing feeling of ease in performing these daily acts

¹⁰² The reasons for not feeling at home with the codes are perhaps not relevant here, but I am quite certain that it has far more to do with class than mastering the French language. The market jargon seems cheeky and rapid, like Eliza Doolittle initially spoke in George Bernhard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

brings about a feeling of being at home. A local subjectivity is germinating. With it, germinates a particular sense of locality.

Re-appropriation of space

The ordered republican space of Paris

Paris is on the one hand a highly centrally controlled space. Most people know the history of the restructuring of Paris by the civic planner Haussmann in the early 1860s. He wiped out unhealthy housing conditions and built the characteristic Parisian six and seven-storey housing blocks in white stone all over the city, laying out a network of broad avenues and boulevards where greatly needed fresh air could circulate, people could stroll and traffic could pass through quickly. These straight and broad thoroughfares also made it easy for the police and military battalions and artillery to quickly move in and curb riots and rebellions in the making. On the other hand, “the ‘wandering lines’ or ‘efficacious meanderings’ [...] undercut the strategic designs of society’s master-builders” (Ingold 2007: 103).

The long stretch of boulevard¹⁰³ running through the East and Northeast, was not created by Haussmann, but was – as the name suggest (boulevard means rampart, city walls (bulwerk in Dutch)) – already running along a city border marking the city taxation zone (*Ferme générale de l’octroi*) from 1784. With the annexation of the neighbouring villages in 1860, the boulevard was preserved.¹⁰⁴ Gould (1995) remarks that the broad boulevards separated communities by creating boundaries full of traffic in between the housing blocks, but on the positive side a stronger sense of neighbourhood was created within the “boundaries”. My impression today, is almost the opposite: With its broad pavements, suitable for football, roller-skating and other games, extremely lively markets, shade trees and numerous benches, the boulevards create instead informal

¹⁰³ This runs all the way from Place de la Nation in the east, up north through Charonne, Ménilmontant, Belleville and La Villette (all rebellious neighbourhoods during the commune and with plenty of slam venues today), turns west by Bassin de l’Ourcq and goes through La Chapelle, Montmartre to Les Batignolles (equally rebellious areas, with a similar demography and with almost as many slam venues as in the Northeast).

¹⁰⁴ Sources: http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mur_des_Fermiers
http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boulevards_parisiens
<http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boulevard> (all accessed 19.08.2011)

meeting-points connecting people. It is in the middle of the boulevard people congregate or go for a stroll. In addition to the major streets,¹⁰⁵ it is along the boulevards most of the shops, cafés and restaurants are located. People tend to choose these main streets when they move around, which creates a stark contrast between the crowded commercial streets and the quiet backstreets.¹⁰⁶

The naming of well-ordered squares and streets reminds the inhabitants and passer-bys that the space they move around in is not only highly structured, but also structured in a consciously republican fashion. The three large squares in the East and Northeast, are *Place de la Bastille*, *Place de la Nation* (renamed (1880) from *Place du Trône*, becoming *Trône Renversé* during the revolution)) and *Place de la République* where I started this chapter.¹⁰⁷ Both squares received their present form and monuments around 1880, the heyday of the nation building of the Third Republic (1870-1940). Boulevard Voltaire connects *République* and *Nation*, and it is the most common route for small to medium demonstrations. It is hardly a coincidence that here the icon of the Enlightenment joins the two pivotal principles of governance in France (a connection locals comment on as well).

In *Place de la République* one finds an almost ten metres high bronze statue of the Republic herself (from 1880-83), dressed in a bonnet with her hair loose and a toga revealing her left breast, lifting an olive branch in her right hand and supporting herself with her left on the Declaration of Human Rights engraved in stone tablets.¹⁰⁸ The base is adorned by three female statues in marble, named *Liberté*, *Fraternité* and *Egalité*: *Freedom* holds broken chains in one hand and a torch in the other; *Brotherhood* holds agricultural products and by her feet, there is a young child reading; and *Equality* waves

¹⁰⁵ Rue de Charonne, Rue de Bagnole, Rue de Ménilmontant, Rue Oberkampf, Rue du Faubourg du Temple and Rue de Belleville.

¹⁰⁶ Half the length of my fieldwork, I had a view – and bedroom – facing one of the busiest of these commercial streets, Rue du Faubourg du Temple, and the sound and movement never stopped to fascinate and frustrate me. The constant chatter of people – be it a background humming or a loud voice, from time to time, in French, Arabic, Chinese, various African languages – and noise from the traffic over the cobble stones between the narrow houses created a particular soundscape. Occasionally when I hear something similar, it immediately brings me back to the energy and exhaustion of fieldwork.

¹⁰⁷ The central boulevard in this chapter is named after the old villages (Charonne, Ménilmontant, Belleville, la Villette, La Chapelle, (but not after Montmartre – instead it is called Boulevard de Rochechouart and Clichy).

¹⁰⁸ Source: <http://www.insecula.com/salle/MS01355.html> (accessed 19.08.2011).

the Tricolour and a set square (triangle). At the base, there is a relief of the *Tennis Court Oath*, as the first of twelve chronologically arranged events.¹⁰⁹

Down in *Place de la Nation*, *The Triumph of the Republic*¹¹⁰ is the central monument. She holds nothing in her hands but is dressed the same way as in the other square, and around her stand representatives of the same kind of symbolism. Both of these monuments, as well as the base of the pillar at *Place de la Bastille*, are usually surrounded by people during demonstrations. Even though people might write something on them, and put up posters, stickers and flags, I would not say that they are defamed¹¹¹ as during the riots in the suburbs in 2005 when buildings carrying the motto of the Republic were burned.

Nearby *Nation*, one finds the small square named *Place de la Réunion* (Reunion being a small French island in the Indian Ocean). Recently, a part of *Nation* itself as well as the metro station, has officially added the name *Place des Antilles* (Les Antilles is the French name for the West Indies, but connotes in particular the still French island of Martinique).

The symbolism and history of the Republic is heavily present in the urban scenery. Every school, library and municipal building is adorned with the Tricolour and the motto of *Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité*. The twenty arrondissement town halls are grandiose buildings, built in prominent squares usually named after prominent men of the (usually Third) Republic. This Republican space symbolises both the spirit of liberation and that of repression (e.g. as the squares and boulevards were built partly with a repressive intention), just as the frequent demonstrations filling the streets are a contestable as well as a highly republican and valued phenomenon. This omnipresent symbolism brandishes a promise. The poor suburbs are the starkest proof for everyone to

¹⁰⁹ 1) The tennis court oath (1789); 2) the storming of the Bastille (1789); 3) night of the 4th of August (1779) when the Constitutive Assembly abolished feudalism; 4) the first feast of the federation the 14th of July 1790; 5) the start of the Prussian war and the call for voluntaries; 6) the victory of the republican army at the battle of Valmy; 7) the proclamation of the abolition of the monarchy; 8) a major sea battle during the revolutionary wars (Glorious First of June); 9) the July Revolution (1830); 10) the abolition of slavery (1848); 11) the proclamation of the Third Republic (1870); and 12) the national feast in 1880 (when Place de la République was inaugurated, however only yet with plastered monuments. The bronze version came three years later). (Source French Wikipedia: Place de la République, accessed 18.10.2011).

¹¹⁰ <http://www.insecula.com/salle/MS01600.html> (accessed 19.08.2011).

¹¹¹ A famous example of the defamation of monuments of national importance is a statue of Churchill in London, which on numerous occasions has been adorned with a green mohawk of grass from a nearby lawn.

see that this promise is not kept, and it was exactly the strongest proponents of the treacherous republican symbolism that was attacked during the riots:¹¹² the school buildings waving their broken promise in everyone's face. In addition, perhaps the school, as a republican institution, symbolised promising equality, freedom and brotherhood through enlightened education. As I will show later in the thesis, the republican values are held in high esteem by Parisian slammers as well. Nevertheless, the problem for many – in slam as well as outside – is that they are not respected in political practice.

Reseau Education Sans Frontiers and the Sans-Papiers

Within this republican grid, the state is heavily present in one other form: The police. Maybe the police presence is not higher per capita, but it certainly feels higher. When I for a short while lived next to Place de la République, every second or third day I saw tens of police vans and buses in the side streets – indicating that a demonstration is taking place in the square. The police are not visibly present from the route of the demonstration until the end.¹¹³ In many cases that would be seen as a provocation, and, as people point out, a violation of the separation of powers in the Republic.

In certain areas of East and North Paris where the number of *sans-papiers* are high, the presence of police vans and the sound of sirens frequently mean police roundups. This is probably well known to a large part of the population in these areas, not least because of how activists use the public space. In addition to the extensive news coverage, posters warning against “roundups in this neighbourhood” are frequently plastered on the walls during the night. Many schools in the areas of Paris where the immigration population is numerous were in 2007 adorned with banners and posters supporting the local *sans-papiers* children, particularly before and during the summer-break when the amnesty for school children were lifted and they could be deported. Some of these banners seem to be put up by the schools themselves and some by *Le Reseau*

¹¹² Like the trousers printed with *Liberté, Égalité, mon cul* (“my ass”) on the back, which I saw in the spring after the riots in the suburbs.

¹¹³ The organisers of the demonstration provide guards, marked with armbands or vests. Under certain circumstances – as during the mass demonstrations against the new employment law (CPE) in the spring 2006 – when a significant numbers of people are considered troublemakers, *casseurs*, the police are highly present, dressed up as demonstrators armed with small cans of teargas (see also Bertho 2009 for an analysis of the extensive usage of police men with the blessing of the trade union organisers against the *casseurs*).

*Education Sans Frontières*¹¹⁴ (RESF, “Network for education without borders” an organisation consisting of teachers, parents and other activists).

One of RESF’s forms of action was to be *parrain* (godfather) for sans-papiers children, which meant various levels of support, from the symbolic aspect (which the socialist mayor Delanoë took part in, being a *parrain* himself) to hiding children the police were seeking. For people who stress the political tradition, or discourse, of France as a welcoming soil (*terre d’accueil*) for immigrants, it is an act of citizenship (*acte de citoyenneté*) to be a godparent for an undocumented child in danger.¹¹⁵ On the note-boards outside the schools, RESF had put up among other forms of information, phone numbers people in danger or witnesses could phone to get immediate, 24-hour help. Roundups were often reported immediately on Internet networks like *Indymedia*¹¹⁶ where people were called upon to be present and bear witness or hinder the police in their work. Passers-by often photographed the action with their mobile phones, also to document eventual police brutality, according to Jean (from the introduction) who witnessed roundups in Belleville on several occasions. Laurent told us how he had seen how the onlookers had hindered the police to such an extent that they had given up. He, who had connections on *Indymedia*, RESF and other networks, claimed that in Belleville for a while the roundups had become so tense due to interference by neighbours that they were suspended.

One such roundup with protests became national and even international news, and made it all the way to the presidential election campaign in the spring 2007. The police attempted to bring in an elderly Chinese man when he came to collect his grandchild at a primary school close to metro Belleville. The police were dressed up in riot gear and acted with brutality right at the time the small children finished school, a reality that shocked many passers-by, teachers and parents. The headmistress interfered and was brutally brought into custody for 24 hours.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ <http://www.educationsansfrontieres.org/> (accessed 19.08.2011).

¹¹⁵ Citizenship is thus often seen as something that should be performed, not just connected to legal rights and duties (Cf. Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

¹¹⁶ paris.indymedia.org/ (accessed 19.08.2011).

¹¹⁷ Source: E.g. <http://www.liberation.fr/societe/010197385-a-belleville-travaux-pratiques-policiers-devant-les-ecoliers> (accessed 19.08.2011).

At the same time as the police presence and the sound of their sirens are a constant reminder of state presence and repression in the everyday life in the local community (largely, I would claim, than as a source of protection), the resistance is at least as palpable in these areas of the city. Together with the wall posters, the banners and the public display of hostility during roundups, the frequent demonstrations organised by the *sans-papiers* organisations¹¹⁸ add to this atmosphere of resistance, as well as to the diversity of the area. Middle-aged to young women and men, often together with small children, make up the bulk of the demonstrators for the *sans-papiers*. Jean remarked that people with the same ethnic background often stick together, the Chinese and black Africans making up various parts of the cortege, while a few people of European origin are scattered. I think he is right that these demonstrations are more ethnically segregated than others are, perhaps pointing to the relatively recent arrival in France of the demonstrators. Many of the black women wear traditional African dresses, as many newly arrived do, in contrast to other blacks. Their songs and slogans treat political issues, like in the song “Sarkozy has forgotten that his parents are foreigners”¹¹⁹ reverberate through the streets they pass (from metro Belleville to Hotel de Ville via Place de la République where they usually make an appeal), visibly and audibly reminding the population of Paris of their presence in their midst. I will quote a translation of this particular song here, as their re-appropriation of recognition and rights echoes much of the later argument in this thesis, particularly from the final chapter:

¹¹⁸ <http://9emecollectif.net/> and <http://pajol.eu.org/rubrique154.html> (both accessed 04/07/08).

¹¹⁹ His father was born in Hungary and his maternal grandfather was born in Ottoman Thessaloniki.

Sarkozy has forgotten that his parents are foreigners (by 9eme Collectif des sans-papiers)¹²⁰

This song is for you, and you, you didn't know
We have liberated Paris, and you, you didn't know
We were in the first line, and you, you didn't know
The colonial soldiers were there, and you, you didn't know
The Senegalese [next lines: Moroccans, Tunisians] were there, and you didn't know
The Sarkozys weren't there, and you, you didn't know
The de Villepins [the Prime Minister at that time] wasn't there, and you, you didn't know
Chirac wasn't there, and you, you didn't know
The riot police weren't there, and you, you didn't know
But that doesn't matter, we don't give a fuck
We want papers, papers for all
Hypocrisy, we're fed up with it
To work illegally, we're fed up with it
The police, we're fed up with it
The anti-riot police, we're fed up with it
The security branch of the police force, we're fed up with it
The [police] headquarters, we're fed up with it

¹²⁰ This version is from the time when Chirac was still President, de Villepin Prime Minister and Sarkozy Interior Minister. I have also heard an interpretation and translation of the song in a radio reportage from a Swedish demonstration for undocumented migrants. The song in French:
Cette chanson est pour toi, et toi tu savais pas / Nous avons libéré Paris, et toi tu savais pas / Et nous étions en première ligne, et toi tu savais pas / Les Tirailleurs étaient là, et toi tu savais pas / Les Sénégalais étaient là, et toi tu savais pas ... Les Marocains étaient là, et toi tu savais pas [...] Les Tunisiens étaient là, et toi tu savais pas [...] Les Sarkozy n' étaient pas là, et toi tu savais pas / Les de Villepin n' étaient pas là, et toi tu savais pas / Chirac n' était pas là, et toi tu savais pas / Les Crs n' étaient pas là, et toi tu savais pas / Mais ça ne fait rien, on s'en fout / On veut des papiers, des papiers pour tous / L' hypocrisie, y en a marre / Travail au noir, y en a marre / La police, y en a marre / Les gardes mobiles, y en a marre / Les RG, y en a marre / Les préfectures, y en a marre / Les procédures, y en a marre / Les avocats, y en a marre / Et qu'est-ce qu' on veut ? / Liberté pour tous / L'égalité pour tous / La dignité pour tous / Et qu' est-ce qu' on veut ? / Des papiers / Pour qui ? / Pour tous / Sans papiers, sans droit / Ecrasés par la loi / Virons Sarkozy / Tout le monde aura des papiers / Sans papier, sans droit... /
Source: <http://lists.indymedia.org/pipermail/imc-france-paris/2006-January/0130-gh.html> (accessed 04.07.2008)

The [law] procedures, we're fed up with it
The lawyers, we're fed up with them
What do we want?
Freedom for all
Equality for all
Dignity for all
What do we want?
Papers
For whom?
For all
Without papers, without rights
Crushed by the law
Fire Sarkozy
Everyone will have papers
Without papers, without rights

The *sans-papiers*' demonstrations make such an impact on the neighbourhoods that my flatmate – usually oblivious to this kind of local political life – in Rue du Faubourg du Temple told me when I moved in that they were demonstrating every Saturday. It appeared not to be that frequent, but it is true that their demonstrations are regular. *Le 9eme collectif* was the only organisation who mobilised the night Nicholas Sarkozy came first in the first round in the presidential election, demonstrating down Boulevard Beaumarchais from Place de la République. A few hundred meters from Place de Bastille the CRS police surrounded the demonstrators.

The battle over space: Place names

Look, concerning marriage, I've questioned my mother. She is in love with the mayor of Paris. She digs Bertrand Delanoë after having seen him at the telly putting down a commemoration plaque at Saint-Michel. It was in the memory of the Algerians thrown into the Seine during the demonstration the 17th of

October 1961, I've borrowed books on that at the library at Livry-Gargan (*Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, Guène 2004: 162, my translation).

At the 8 February 2007, I was present at the inauguration by mayor Delanoë of *Place du 8 Février 1962* at the intersection Rue de Charonne and Boulevard Voltaire outside metro Charonne. The new street sign reads: "Date of the demonstration against the war in Algeria when 9 demonstrators died at Metro Charonne." The C.G.T., one of the trade unions organising the demonstration in 1962, had put up a commemoration plaque inside the metro station several years ago. It read:

Here, the 8 February 1962, in the middle of a demonstration by the people of Paris for peace in Algeria, nine workers, communists, political activists from [the labour union] C.G.T., of whom the youngest was 16 years, died, victims of the repression [followed by the eight names, both male and female].¹²¹

Every year, a commemorative demonstration is organised by the communist party and trade unions at the date of the deaths. Afterwards, flowers are put on the grave in the communist section at the grandiose cemetery Père Lachaise (another landmark in the East-Paris (mythic) geography), where between 500 000 and 1 000000 people followed the funeral cortege during the turbulent winter of 1961-62. The head of the police, Maurice Papon continued in his job as if nothing had happened, as he had after the *nuît noire* ("black night") the 17 October 1962. In 2006, the commemorations outdoors were followed by a debate in the main hall¹²² in the stately 19th-century town hall for the 11th Arrondissement.

¹²¹ Ici le 8 février 1962, au cours d'une manifestation du peuple de Paris pour la paix en Algérie, neuf travailleuses et travailleurs, des communistes, des militants de la C.G.T., dont le plus jeune avait 16 ans, sont morts victimes de la répression...

¹²² I see as a clear sign of the acknowledgement of the event by the part of the City of Paris that the very critical discussion where many participants of that time bore witness, took place in the main hall (*la salle de mariage*) in the town hall. This hall, like similar public buildings in Paris, is seeped with republican symbolism as well as more unspoken *valeurs de la république*. I had not been to a place like this before during my fieldwork, and I was struck by the grandness of the Republic as engraved in these walls. After 2006 it seems that the municipality arrange debates and commemoration on a yearly basis.

In 2007, with the inauguration of the new name and the presence of the mayor, several hundred people attended, which was perhaps double or triple the number of the year before. Both years, the majority of the participants were elderly people with connections to the trade unions and/or the communist party, judging from badges and flags they carried. In 2007, however, I also noticed several children. A father of North African origin lifted his child up to the not yet unveiled road sign. The son asked where it happened, and he answered, “right here, in the stairs down to the metro.” He passed on the memory, as the parents and uncles had done according to the above-quoted Facebook messages of 17 October.

It is through action and naming that the empty, abstract space is given significance for human perception (Bender 2002; Tilley 1994). The historical event of the 8 February 1962 has been kept alive in the memory by annual commemoration by the Communist Party and certain labour unions, by people who participated and the descendants of the dead, and probably other people with strong relations to the (struggle against the) Algerian war and colonial French Algeria. An important point in the articles and debates surrounding this and similar events concerning colonial France, however, has been the lack of state acknowledgement – or in many cases pure obfuscation and lies (*mensonges d'état*, “state lies” is a recurrent claim) – about the facts. The theme goes, in speeches as well as on websites, that there is a “memory work” (*travail de memoir*) to be done as the state has not recognised its responsibility, and the nation should take account (*se rendre compte*). It is this forgetfulness – *l'oubli* – inscribed into national French history, that activists and mayor Delanoë want to write against through “telling the truth and write it into time” (*dire la vérité et l'inscrire dans le temps*), as the mayor formulated it during his inauguration speech in 2007. “In a fundamental way names create landscapes,” the geographer Charles Tilley (1994: 19) writes.

Place names are of such vital significance because they act as to transform the sheerly physical and geographical into something that is historically and socially experienced. [...] By the process of naming places and things they become captured in social discourses and act as mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups. (Tilley 1994: 18)

Keeping Appadurai's argument in mind, local subjects are created in the same process. I have now shown how the landscape of Paris has been strategically designed by stately and republican master-builders.¹²³ For in the next instance it is reshaped by the inhabitants through their trails of life, wandering lines, efficacious meanderings (Ingold 2007) and resistance, persistence and collective action. Their effort writes the history of all the inhabitants of the Republic into its official landscape, not only in the living meshwork of Belleville. In Chapter 11, I return to this issue from the perspective of the ongoing re-appropriation of French official history, thus appropriation of time rather than space.

Summing up

An important aim of this chapter has been to lay the ground for exploring one of the major questions during my fieldwork: What constitutes the similarities and connections I immediately sensed between the ambiance or "feel" of the slam sessions and the environment they spring? I have suggested that both Belleville and the sessions create a fluid space where categories of all kinds mix and blur, thus providing possibilities for liberating singular individuals from bounded, striated identity figurations. *La France Métissée* lives in the meshwork of trails of life in the streets of Belleville, and in the sessions she finds a place to have her heterogeneity and multiplicity of voices heard and "inscribed into reality" (see Chapter 8). The metropolis – the postcolonial metropolis of Paris, with its very heart in the neighbourhoods of the northern and northeastern arrondissements – is the site of the multitude, composed of singularities with irreducible differences that mobilises what it shares in common through biopolitical production (Hardt and Negri 2004: 101). The biopolitical creativity, resistance and production on the streets of Belleville take the form of various re-appropriations of space, like the abundance of street art, political and artistic wall posters, demonstrations, the presence of

¹²³ In "the red belt" of socialist suburbs north and east of Paris, the names of streets and squares not only mark republican space, but also recreate the landscape as (internationalist) socialist, using the names of Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, Salvador Allende, Pablo Picasso, Pablo Neruda... In Bobigny and Creteil, two lycées are even named after the anarchist legend from the Paris Commune, Louise Michel. Several of these suburbs, like Gennevilliers, La Courneuve in Aubervilliers, and in 2011 also Blanc-Mesnil, have officially named streets or squares after the 17th of October 1961.

artisans and artists and their ateliers, small-scale businesses and “grass-root” associations. In the next chapter, I will go into detail about what the biopolitical creativity consists of in the fluid space of the slam session.

Chapter 6 – “We can mix anything, we don’t give a fuck”¹²⁴

The fluid space of a slam session as it flows and folds and “decompartmentalises” environment, life and experience

Although the performances in a slam session, primarily, speak to the ears and eyes, it is the sensation of motion that struck me the most. At very good sessions, the whole room seems to be in motion: There is the constant, repetitive movement up and down from the “stage”, as the poets take turns stepping into the limelight. Often more than half of the people present participate. I wonder; does some of the sensation of movement come from the fact that it quite likely could have been me who went up there? Then there are the rhythms of the texts; the movements in sound as well as in imagery, bring the listener along to other people, other places, and other perspectives. The slammers themselves often describe slam as “opening up” and removing partitions, barriers and separations (*décloisonner*¹²⁵), inside persons as well as between them¹²⁶, and even in a physical sense between Paris and the suburbs.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first, I compare the venue of tonight’s session with three quite different other venues, in order to highlight the differences and similarities. In the second, I present an evening as it unfolds – or rather folds and flows. I try to describe it more or less, as it moved, bored and intrigued me. I

¹²⁴ “On peut tout mélanger, on s’en fout” as Dgiz ended an introduction to another slam session, after saying among other things, that we slam with vowels, consonants and emotions, in French, foreign languages, and with the hands and words (*mains et mots*), looks and feet.

¹²⁵ <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/décloisonner> (accessed 31.05.2011).

¹²⁶ These effects will be described in, respectively, Chapter 7, “The art of bare necessity: Poetry and therapy”, and in Chapter 10, “‘I write French in a foreign language’: The universal human and difference”. Chapter 8, *Les mots sont des vêtements de l’émotion*: How slam animate at the deepest level with the help of emotions, words and *poiesis*” discusses *how* these effects are brought about.

ought to be repeated however that much of my description as well as memory of sensations are triggered by scrutinising video recordings. My experiences and memories of each person were naturally not consistent and systematic throughout the session. I sometimes found interest in the lyrics, sometimes in the appearance, sometimes in interaction, and sometimes the unusual and unexpected. The descriptions might therefore at times appear idiosyncratic, but they try to convey what gave me, as a first time spectator at *L'Atelier du Plateau*, these specific experiences.

In order to explore this geography of *ouverture* (“openness”), I follow up the perspective of the previous chapter of the environment and its inhabitants as a zone of entanglement, an ever-evolving weave (Ingold 2008). To understand the micro-weaving taking place in the three or four hours a slam session lasts, I first compare the particular venue of a neighbourhood theatre with three other venues: a small bar, a (trendy) café/restaurant and a suburban cultural centre. The questions I will explore concern the relationship between neighbourhood and participants and between the various spatial arrangements – size, seating, lighting, noise, eating, drinking and the interaction that takes place. First, however, I will provide a frame of interpretation, which conceptualises the slam session as a fluid space where people, imageries, differences and relations mix, transform, entangle and break down barriers.

Solvent variables in fluid space

The rules “frame” the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood, but banks without a river epitomize aridity. (Turner 1982: 79)

The easily perceptible rules and ethos of slam “frame” the sessions; one knows what to do and what to expect. Still the “variation of variables” – all ingredients of everyday life of the participants and the everyday surroundings of the Parisian venues – as well as the freedom of movement and manoeuvring that in the ethos, enhance, I claim, a sense of “flow”. This may as Turner writes, “conduce to hitherto unprecedented insights and even generate new symbols and meanings” (Turner 1982: 79). Some of these unprecedented

insights, symbols and meanings have the capacity of creating persons and relations anew, as I claim in the following chapters.

In order to understand the relationship between the different variables of the slam session, I will examine in this part of the chapter how the physical features of the venues and their surroundings affect the composition, action and interaction of the session. I will explore the space of slam as hydraulic or fluid, where the relations between the various elements *dissolve* and variables turn *variable*, as Annemarie Mol and John Law describe the dissolution of a “network” into “fluid space” (1994). In the theoretical introduction, I summed up the four characteristics of fluid space as the lack of clear boundaries, mixing, robustness and the intricate relations between Mol and Law’s three typologies of social space. The composition of the various elements in the slam session I suggest slide between all three social topologies of “homogenous regions”, “network” and “fluidity”. There are theoretically numerous constant elements in fixed relations (i.e. their definition of “network”) when people come together in a public place to perform their texts in allotted time slots. From the “homogenised and bounded regions” of dichotomous social and geographical categories (e.g. Bourdieu’s aggregation of distinctions into social positions), emerge ways of moving the body (body hexis), ways of speaking, ways of dressing and certain topics to address. They all receive much of their symbolic meaning from their relations to the particular “regional spaces” of French/Parisian socio-political geography. Then, in fluid slam space, boundaries blur, and mixing of various kinds and degrees occur.

In addition, the seemingly constant relations between physical elements dissolve quickly in slam space: There is sometimes a microphone, but often not. There is often some kind of stage, but sometimes not. At times there is just a carpet and sometimes not even a clearing; I have seen the performers move around in-between chairs and tables. Then, there is the lighting, the acoustics and sounds, the attentiveness, the competing activities of eating and drinking and smells from the kitchen, the shivering papers in nervous hands or texts known by heart... “There’s never a session that resembles another,” Dgiz underlines. – He, similar to many others, defines slam as ephemeral moments (*instants éphémères*) created through encounters (*rencontres*). – And never a text that is performed identically twice, as there are innumerable possibilities for

variation in reciting, in facial expressions, tone of voice, emphasis on words, speed, style level.¹²⁷ Everything in the room contributes to alter relations between person and text and between performance and reception – from seating arrangements, furniture, lightening, noise, smells. And the people present and not present, as well as “external” circumstances like the approaching presidential election, the death of someone, the recent split-up of the host’s relationship. Moreover, the person-person relations vary at least as much as the person-materiality and person-text, in time and across space: The artistic collaborations are, with a few exceptions, ephemeral.¹²⁸ On a personal level, the milieu abounds of friendships and a few animosities, love, sex, children, chat-ups, split-ups, divorces and a few deaths.

Why this session with Dgiz at l’Atelier du Plateau?

The session I have chosen to present in depth is hosted by Dgiz and takes place at the small neighbourhood theatre *L’Atelier du Plateau* at Butte Chaumont just above Belleville. This particular *soirée* (“night”) as well as its host were the ones most recommended to me by fellow slammers, occasional slam goers and even a music journalist from Radio France Culture who had made long reportages with several of the most prominent slammers. Dgiz is a brilliant host and entertainer, and many regard him as the most interesting slammer. Both he as an individual and the venue itself attract a wide variety of performers and an attentive audience. Many describe the atmosphere here as particularly convivial (an adjective often used for slam sessions in general). Unlike a majority of other hosts, Dgiz allows musical accompaniment and invites a jazz or classical musician from his broad network of collaborators to improvise to the texts performed. The high quality of the musicians probably also adds to the high esteem held of his sessions.

As I showed in the introduction “Poetically man dwells”, slam interlocks – both practically but also explicitly in its ethos – an artistic or aesthetic and an educational or

¹²⁷ At one session, Dgiz read a little poem, *Les petites choses*, “the small things” in everyday life that make life worth living twice. First he recited it in a neutral manner, afterwards the identical words in a punk style full of rage. The first appeared as a simple, yet beautiful hymn to the simple things in life, the second a yell from a person in pain, where I as a listener got the impression that all these simple, small harmonic acts in everyday life were absent.

¹²⁸ For instance, before the pause in my fieldwork (from August to December 2006), I had decided to study the collective *État d’Urgence Poétique*, but they no longer collaborated when I returned.

socio-cultural dimension – a connection that Dgiz epitomises more strongly than most. The night I will present in the second half of this chapter, Wednesday the 21st of February 2007, demonstrates this artistic, social, political and personal complexity of the slam phenomenon well. It turned out not to be the artistically best of the four sessions I was to attend there, and both Dgiz and Laetitia, the artistic director of the theatre, appeared slightly apologetic when they characterised to me afterwards it as a bit *chaos* and *cowboy*. (Only after recurrent questioning, did Dgiz explain me what he meant by it, as it seems against the slam ethos to criticise amateurs). It was, however, my first time at L'Atelier, and I quickly grasped why so many had ushered me in direction of Dgiz and his *carte blanche* event.

The materiality of places: L'Atelier du Plateau, Xango Bar, Lou Pascalou and the suburban Slam Caravane:

The theatre l'Atelier du plateau,

*L'Atelier du Plateau*¹²⁹ has its name from the street where it is situated, Rue du Plateau, up the hill at a natural plateau in the 19th arrondissement, just above Belleville and close to the mountainous park Butte Chaumont. The park has attracted wealthier and “high culture” inhabitants than what is the case further down the hill. However, social housing is abundant here as well, like in the whole of the Northeast. Indicatively of the spirit of this area of Paris, in a nearby neighbourhood consisting of turn-of-the-20th-century villas, the streets proudly carry the names “Liberté”, “Égalité”, “Fraternité”, “Résistance” and “Progrès”, in addition to names of French poets. In comparison, in the west, affluent and right-wing areas of the city a similar neighbourhood constructed in the same period are named after the former owner of the land, a duchesse (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2009: 185). In French, *plateau* means – in addition to the geographical phenomenon of plateau – a theatre stage, a set or line-up in film or television, a turntable and a tray. *Atelier* means workshop, studio and connotes both artistic and academic work in progress, both individually and collectively. The building housing the theatre is converted from a piping workshop. The name thus situates the theatre in the local geography as well as in the

¹²⁹ <http://atelierduplateau.free.fr/> (accessed 31.05.2011)

history of the building. As my description suggests, this theatre, through both its name and its program, attempts in various ways to dissolve distinctions between a working-class tradition (the building, parts of the neighbourhood, some members of the artistic crew...) and what has traditionally been considered “high culture”.

The neighbourhood as well as the theatre carry no resemblance to the definition of “regional space” of Mol and Law (1994) where differences are suppressed into a homogenous representation. It is as much a lower class “banlieue” with high-rise housing estates as a middleclass area, as much the home of the avant-garde, as the bourgeoisie and the working-class. The locals here carry the symbolism of the various categories, including the *jeunes de banlieue*. At *L'Atelier du Plateau* they interact.

The small theatre consists of one high-lofted, rectangular room with a staircase and a narrow mezzanine in one end and an open kitchen and a bar/counter in the other end: A room where boundaries blur, where the smell and subdued noise from the movements in the kitchen end mix with the sound, lights and movements from the artistic creations. It has once been a workshop for manual work, and it still is. The theatre plays are usually performed at the other end from the bar along the short wall under the mezzanine. For slam sessions, on the other hand, Dgiz sets up the “stage” – consisting of a carpet and his low chair and table – in the middle of the longer wall. Thus, instead of having the stage and the performers in one end of the room and the audience in the other, the audience surrounds the carpet-cum-stage like a crescent. This spatial arrangement sums up an important aspect of the slam ethos: the proximity, between “stage” and world, performers and audience.

At the time of my fieldwork, Dgiz (mid thirties) lived for free at the place of the artistic “directrice” of the theatre, ten minutes downhill, in the heart of Belleville. He often attends concerts and plays at the theatre, and the crew, consisting of the directrice, a Brazilian cook, one or two barmen (and some others for the theatre plays), all in late their thirties or early forties, appear to be good friends. Since the theatre is so close by where he lives, Dgiz often drops by for a chat, a smoke and maybe a (needed) meal at the end of the evening on his way home.

... Xango bar,

A quite different session from the one at *Atelier du Plateau* is the bimonthly at Xango Bar. The hosts are two men, one around forty the other around thirty, respectively Johann Guyot-Baron (called Yo) and Abd el Haq. They have formed the collective *Les Chasseurs de Textes* (“The Text Hunters”¹³⁰), which presents itself on Facebook and MySpace as an “Association by law 1901 for the promotion of speech (*langue*) without muzzle.” The slam night called “Animal Factory” (original in English) started up in early spring 2007 and the flyers invited to a session “back to the original” (*Slam brut, à l’ancienne*). On the flyers made of cheap, thin yellow paper, the text is written in an uneven, typewriter-like font:

no stage and without mike, the UNPROCESSED MATERIAL (*matière brute*) of the text, to say, read, scan/chant, listen. in the pit, a text said a glass on the house. (Session 19 June 2007).

The very first slam venues were small bars without microphones and stages. For Abd el, this creates more equal conditions for inexperienced performers who do not master (*maîtriser*) the skills of addressing others or even an audience through a mic and from a stage. While Dgiz, the host at *L’Atelier du Plateau*, quit school around 12, and Yo around 14, Abd el Haq has a university degree from prestigious Sciences Po (Institute of Political Studies).

Xango is a small bar situated in a small street in the immigrant neighbourhood *Goutte d’Or* between the metro stations *Barbès* and *La Chapelle* in the 18th arrondissement in Northern Paris. Just after Abd el moved in across the street, he got to know the bar owner who was on the lookout for possible cultural events for his new bar, and they decided to start up a slam session. When I finished my fieldwork, there seemed to be more and more concerts, film screenings and readings going on there, something the owner already had in the pipelines when I spoke to him in the summer 2007. Like *L’Atelier*, Xango brings cultural events right into the immediate neighbourhood where

¹³⁰ Les Chasseurs de Textes also consists of Abd el Haq’s girlfriend who is often present at Xango, but apparently not elsewhere and who does not slam herself, but has a regular white-collar job.

people live. In both cases, the events communicate well with the socio-economic as well as “ethnic” profile of the neighbourhood. They also somehow “stretch” the expectations in the sense of mixing in unexpected elements and making the event more than entertainment and “preaching to the converted”. Examples of this is giving the formally uneducated, slang-speaking ex-convict Dgiz carte blanche among the arty middleclass of Butte Chaumont, or the wide variety of live events staged in a tiny bar in what must be one of the poorest, most dilapidated neighbourhoods in Paris proper.

Xango is a quite typical small Parisian bar: an almost square room with the counter just inside the door and large windows along one wall facing the street. Contrary to L’Atelier, people smoke inside (it was not yet prohibited in spring 2007), but still spill out on the pavement during the two breaks. Xango is one of the few places where I never heard about complaints about noise from the neighbours, maybe because the neighbourhood is considered rough and noisy anyway. The performances take place opposite the counter, almost in the middle of the room, encircled by the audience. At Atelier du Plateau, the audience sits on low chairs with small tables in-between for drinks and dinner, while at Xango, there are just a few tall bar stools and a couple of tall tables, so most people stand, thus they are on the same level as the performers.

The physical aspects of the lighting, the size of the locale, the distribution of people (almost totally encircling versus a crescent; sitting versus standing like the slammers), perhaps make the performances at l’Atelier slightly more of a *performance* than the ones at Xango, which probably is perceived as even more inclusive and *participative*. In addition, the way Dgiz plays the role of the host gives his session a slight hint of show/performance compared to the event at Xango. As I will show, Dgiz performs more of his own texts than any other host I have heard, as well.

L’Atelier is usually very crowded towards the end, with maybe more than a hundred people, and a little more than one third is performing. At Xango, the ratio of performers is higher, where perhaps two thirds of the audience enter into the circle and performs. As there are often no more than around fifteen-twenty performers, each get the opportunity to perform several times. Considering Johann’s (Yo) definition of slam quoted in the introduction (which comes from an interview conducted at Xango before a session) – there is no rehearsal and perfection, only the artistic and social manifestation

of the performance itself. – One might say that performing at Xango approaches more the “rehearsal” end on the continuum of slam, while at L’Atelier it approaches a more serious and finished artistic product. The threshold for entering into the circle and performing is probably lower, or at least differently sensed, at intimate Xango.

There is certainly a closeness between performer and audience at L’Atelier – due to the proximity between audience and carpet-cum-stage, and the low chairs – however, the bright stage lighting dazzles the performers slightly and makes it hard to see to whom one speaks. Even though the locale is not big, it is still far bigger than tiny Xango where the performers stand no more than a meter and a half – and often closer – from the surrounding audience. This proximity invites closer interaction, and the performer quite frequently verbally or gesticulatory draws members of the audience into their show, for instance by explicitly playing for and into my video camera (which only Ucoc sometimes does elsewhere). There is no stage lightening, only the ordinary lights – dim or bright – in the bar. Zeor who sometimes needs to read his new texts asked once for the light in the ceiling to be turned on, and I asked once to keep it on as well to get better quality on my video recordings. I have not experienced that people interfere in this way in the much more staged environment at L’Atelier.

...and Café Lou Pascalou

A third and again different session is the one hosted by the collective 129H (pronounced *cent-vingt-neuf H*, after a street address) at Lou Pascalou, not far from the metro station Ménilmontant. 129H was created in 2001, which makes them the oldest slam collective in Paris, and many renowned slammers began their career at one of their sessions. That was before the milieu split in the – seemingly, in 2007 at least – every-increasing number of scenes, and many mentioned with nostalgia the time when you could see all the prominent old-timers on the same stage. It is said that 129H set up the session at Lou Pascalou in an attempt to recreate the all-together atmosphere from the early 2000s, an attempt, which seems to have succeeded fairly well.

Lou Pascalou is a very inviting, perhaps *slightly branché* (trendy) café. It is nicely situated in a 90-degree turn in a picturesque street providing it with a very pleasant pavement terrace that is so nice and inviting that I was very tempted to sit down the first

time I passed by chance, long before I knew of the slam scene in the area. This attractiveness is not typical for most other slam venues – “cheap brown places”, I heard someone¹³¹ call them – but it is however also quite indicative of the kind of slam night one gets at Lou Pascalou. While Dgiz’s sessions at L’Atelier are often said to be the most interesting, 129H’s sessions are the most popular (together with the one at Café Culturel in Saint Denis, hosted by a close friend of 129H, the immensely successful Grand Corps Malade and his two friends¹³²). At Lou Pascalou, the slammers know they have to arrive early to get on the list, a list the hosts follow strictly chronologically. The night I filmed,¹³³ there were 47 performances, a number I think is quite usual here, but higher than anywhere else I had been. A friend of mine, who had never been to a slam session before, came with me to Lou Pascalou and was amazed that half of the people present got up on stage. Probably it was a little less than that, but one can easily get a sensation of movement on particularly vibrant nights. I would estimate that there is the same number of people present at L’Atelier as at Lou, but a slightly larger proportion perform at the latter.

Lou Pascalou is a restaurant, bar and café that serves lunch and dinner and hosts concerts catering to a younger and trendier audience than the (more arty) theatre that is home to Dgiz’s session. The slam session hosted by 129H fits well into this program: The three young men, Rouda, Lyor and Néobled, start the session with an energetic and noisy rap-like collaboration and drink, laugh and joke more than most other hosts. In contrast, Dgiz – a dry alcoholic – touches nothing but Perrier.¹³⁴ Johann (Yo) drinks excessively but in a sardonic way fuelling his theatrical image as “your life is your artwork” kind of

¹³¹ A person I was briefly introduced to as he had written a dissertation in Marketing on the slam phenomenon. He said that the slam usually took place in cafés he normally wouldn’t go to.

¹³² Slam collectives seem usually to be “ethnically” mixed. Grand Corps Malade, who looks “white”, works with his two pals Ami Karim, of North African origins, and John Puccé ‘Chocolat’, originating from Burkina Faso. In 129H, Neobled is of West African origins, while the two others seem to be of European ancestry. In Spoke Orkestra, Félix and Nada seem “white”, Abd el Haq’s parents came from Morocco and D de Kabal describes himself to a Caribbean internet magazine as “an Antillean from Bobigny who doesn’t speak Creole and learned ‘his history’ late”.

(http://www.gensdelacaraibe.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3007:d-de-kabal-jamais-trop-tard-pour-etre-conscient&catid=50, accessed 31.05.2011).

¹³³ It is monthly, but chance happened that I only filmed one and attended two, so my material from Lou Pascalou is not as extensive as from the other venues I discuss here.

¹³⁴ Tsunami does not drink, but he has never given any reason why. In the interview he just called himself neither drug addict nor alcoholic.

dandy (in a “glam metal”¹³⁵ looking vein) with dark political satire, while his companion Abd el Haq drinks, but neither boisterously nor theatrically.

At Lou Pascalou, there is both a microphone and a “stage”, two steps up that consists of a “platform” with a few tables and chairs in one end of the locale. The three hosts sit at a table at the one side of the platform. While the space at Atelier du Plateau is created to host theatre of the contemporary arty kind and other performances, and Xango is a neighbourhood bar for drinking and chatting, Lou Pascalou is primarily a space for eating and drinking. Many come there to eat during the session and even more come to drink. At L’Atelier, the seating arrangement is organised particularly for the slam session and put up to face the “stage”, as the room is always recreated to function differently for the different sessions and shows. Lou Pascalou on the other hand, is a fixed space, with tables and chairs arranged for people to eat, drink and talk facing each other. Thus, people have to adjust their position in order to see what takes place on stage. Perhaps this spatial arrangement, in addition to the fact that there is far more drinking here – both among the audience and the hosts – than at L’Atelier, create a different atmosphere which becomes quite noisy and exuberant towards the end. Much noise from the increasing crowd at the terrace also enters the open doors (and windows). There is very little talking at Atelier du Plateau and if somebody talks during a performance, Dgiz hushes them. This is not the case at Lou, neither at the session hosted by RiM – Rouda’s girlfriend, which largely draws part of the same crowd. Xango is so small and intimate, that more than a whispered remark would be blatantly rude, as one would be talking right in the face of the performer.

These three slam nights/venues draw *much* of the same clientele, as it is really one milieu it concerns, but it is a milieu composed of various more or less loose “bundles of lines of growth” (Ingold 2008: 1807) issuing forth around persons and places, which by their diversity contribute to the exceptional heterogeneity of Parisian slam. The three versions of fluid slam space in three different parts of Northeast Paris that I have

¹³⁵ With black leather trousers, black singlets (often with some slogan on, like “Asian Babes” or *Sarkozy est une pute* (Sarkozy is a whore, which was not well received when he presented at a larger slam event, as many found it simplistic and unnecessarily provocative), sometimes a white feather boa for festive occasions, skinny and pale white and with black eye-makeup and the half long, unruly heavy metal haircut. Yo does not hide that he deals cocaine (he even boasts that he is the regular dealer to the ancient cultural minister under Mitterand, Jack Lang) and that he was part of the original Narcotics Anonymous group in Pigalle, which developed into the first slam milieu (see Chapter 7).

presented here, illustrate well the span of diversity in Parisian slam. Lou Pascalou goes in the direction of urban arts and hip-hop, it attracts slightly more Blacks than the other nights (which all has a large majority of white-looking peoples), has a noticeable party atmosphere, and the hosts are three boisterous young men. Small and intimate Xango bar is less hip-hop and more rock, less Black and more North African, as it is located in North African-dominated Barbès, with both a presenters and a barman of North African descent.¹³⁶ Moreover, they are more overtly political, as all three – the barman, Abd el Haq and Yo – express political views more readily than the 129H collective, and more directly than Dgiz. Even though Dgiz comes from rap, his sessions at the arty neighbourhood theatre have a contemporary art edge that the others lack. This is due to the musicians he invites (and with whom he also works for other projects) as well as the other usages of L’Atelier du Plateau. It should be stressed that these are tendencies and not clear-cut, as many people and elements are present most places.

And the suburban Slam Caravane, nomadic between cultural centres

The last session/venue I will look at exemplifies another important dimension of Parisian slam: The relation to the *banlieues* and the socio-cultural engagement of slam. *Slam Caravane* is an initiative by the actor, dancer, slammer, rapper and playwright D’ de Kabal, which receives economical support from the Department Council of Seine-Saint-Denis and youth services in the five participating suburbs.¹³⁷ While the majority of slam sessions in Paris proper are small private initiatives (e.g. the barman at Xango, the small theatre L’Atelier du Plateau or the collective 129H itself) the *Slam Caravane* has a more top-down structure and touch. It consists of bimonthly workshops for “youth” – local elders and in the case of Saint Denis also – and monthly slam sessions which circulate between Youth or Cultural Centres in the five suburban cities of Bobigny, Aubervilliers, Saint-Ouen, Montreuil and Saint Denis, all situated in the Department of Seine-Saint-Denis, the “9-3”. The workshops are hosted by reputable slammers, of whom three have grown up – and still live – in the respective suburbs: the initiator D’ is from Bobigny,

¹³⁶ Interestingly it has not (yet) engaged the newly immigrated local population of Goutte d’Or which is now predominantly of black African origin.

¹³⁷ http://www.d2kabal.com/ateliers_2.html (accessed 3.06.2011)

Hocine Ben from Aubervilliers and Grand Corps Malade from Saint Denis. In addition, Abd el Haq and Félix Jousserand host in Saint-Ouen and Ucoc has replaced Gérard Mendy in Montreuil.

In addition to attracting many of the same participants as in the city, the Slam Caravane sessions also function as neighbourhood events with a more widespread family appeal than *intra muros*. This is because many locals participate, and the suburban Youth or Cultural Centres represent one of the few local cultural attractions. The sessions usually take place in the main hall of the centre, which invariably has a higher stage than any of the venues have that I have been to in Paris. In addition, most have seating arrangements in rows, which make the session more into a show than an open slam event. This is however not the case in all senses, as the percentage of participation is very high. At the last festive session before the summer break in 2007, the organisers very successfully made up for the formal features of the main hall by arranging the last of three sets in the café of the theatre in Aubervilliers, which was the host city that time. Good food and non-alcoholic drink (as always at Slam Caravane due to its family profile) were served for free, and the atmosphere was very convivial even though it all took place inside in the middle of a sunny summer Sunday (Usually the Caravane takes place at night, but not necessarily in the weekends).

Yo, who is closely affiliated with the initiator D', is the host also at the Slam Caravane and as usual, his appearance – glam rock/New York punk scene anno 1980 – and theatricality brings in a rugged twist to the convivial family friendly atmosphere. He often comments political issues in his hosting in a manner considered a bit over the top but nevertheless consistent with his character, like aligning the time running up to Sarkozy's victory in the presidential election to the 1930s Germany. Similarly, and unlike most other hosts – for reasons I will come to – he often compliments the performers. In the case of women, this often involves their appearance.¹³⁸ His texts usually concern East

¹³⁸ I could not help but find this staggeringly sexist each time I heard Yo remark on the looks or body of a female performer. Most – but not all (see the second half of the chapter) – others who knew him either saw no reason to react or excused it as part of his (theatrical) character. When I think of this widespread reaction in hindsight, I start to wonder if it indicates something more than “just” French lenience with gender and sexual matters as well as with Anglo-American “political correctness” in terms of “correct” speech, as I thought at the time. Might it rather be the strong tendency of the slam milieu to see each person as an individual or a singularity, not to be judged according to a “matter-form” (hylomorphic) model where

Asian women, usually trapped in trafficking, prostitution or life as undocumented immigrants (e.g. one about a Chinese young female undocumented immigrant who killed herself by throwing herself from the window in Belleville in 2008 because she feared being caught by the police), and whom he frequently states that he adores and who frequently accompanies him as well (without slamming themselves). The first time I saw and heard Yo, he got up on a table and read a text about the plight of the Palestinians. I was very much struck by the contrast between the glossy heavy metal looks and the accusing and hard-hitting politics in his text. With his bohemian unrestrictiveness in relation to cocaine, alcohol and sex, he brings in a darker side to what sometimes is called *rap gentil* ("kind rap"). At the Slam Caravane sessions, he slightly tunes down his black eye make-up and shocking commentaries (and probably cocaine intake, but not necessarily alcohol although the event seems non-alcoholic). but I still think it is quite indicative of Parisian slam that the person with the least "family friendly" appearance and behaviour is chosen to lead the event with the highest proportion of small children and families. The reason why he is often chosen for these jobs is probably that he is considered entertaining and with a sense of humour (however "black") and that he is an old friend of D', the initiator. That his personality and style bring in this rugged twist, I think is just seen as a bonus.

At Saint Denis, Yo co-hosts with the workshop *animateurs* Grand Corps Malade and Fleur du Maroni. The workshops here take place partly at the Cultural Centre L13 (named after the metro line 13 which goes to Saint Denis), partly at a home for the elderly where some of the elders live. The organisers try to initiate collaborations between a young person and an elderly person. These collaborations are later performed at the sessions. In addition, most "youth" as well as elders perform their individual texts at the sessions. A couple of people in their (late) thirties from the municipality also participate enthusiastically at workshops and sessions. While the elders are locally based, only some of the young people are. (And they are not as young as the initiators probably would have liked them to be as most are in their twenties, and none of them appear

the form organisers matter? There is perhaps not *one* "politically correct" way of behaving, but all – or most – variables are variable, according to time, place and person.

particularly lost for words.) In addition, at the sessions, people come from the neighbourhood as well as from all over Paris, as is usual.

The participants at the various workshops travel to the other Slam Caravane cities for the sessions, apart from most (all?) of the elderly from Saint Denis. Other elders, like Marie-Françoise whom we will meet later in this chapter (and who has circulated among several workshops), travel to sessions in the suburbs as well as the city equally as much as younger people. She describes herself as short of breath, and she drives a car. After sessions in the suburb, she readily brings people in the direction of where they are going, often to a metro station. Typically, people with cars offer others a lift in the suburbs, as it is often harder to find suitable public transport.

Summing up statistical features from the four venues.

I attended all the four nights at L'Atelier du Plateau during the spring. They lasted about three and a half hours, including a 15-minute break, and included between thirty and forty performances. In addition, Dgiz performed at least two texts and usually the musician had one solo improvisation. The statistical break-up of these four sessions is: 42 % women, 58 % men, equally distributed in the following age sets (as perceived by the anthropologist): 3% under ten years and under twenty, 23% between twenty and thirty, 37% between thirty and forty, 11% between forty and fifty, 13% between fifty and sixty and 11% over sixty.

At Xango, I attended four sessions as well.¹³⁹ The statistical breakup here is slightly different from Atelier du Plateau. There are fewer performers so each performer can return twice or three times. No children are present, and with the exception of one night with many pupils from Abd el Haq's atelier, there are very few under 20 and I have yet to see anyone over 60 (but this must be a coincidence as I know of people in their 60s and 70s who have performed here). The gender balance is also different from Atelier, with 69% men (58/42 at L'Atelier).

At Atelier du Plateau, at least half appear more or less regularly at other venues,

¹³⁹ They started up in February, but as it coincided with another session (with Caroline Carl and Ucoc whom I followed more closely at the time), it took me a while to begin attending their sessions. When I finally started going, however, I found it to be one of the absolutely most interesting and rewarding sessions, although quite different from the one at L'Atelier.

while I have seen about a fifth regularly at *Atelier du Plateau* but not elsewhere. The rest are new to me or new appearances all together, for instance a couple of actors from Congo who have come to play at *Atelier du Plateau* for an other occasion, an old pupil from a writer's workshop Dgiz held a long time ago, new slammers, some children who are there with their parents. There is, however, at least one regular among the children as well, a little boy aged around 4-5, who performed different children's songs each time he was there.

I try to draw conclusions about whether experienced slammers who travel around are more likely to know their text by heart or not, but I do not think this is the case. Some of them, I have never observed having to peek on a piece of paper (e.g. Dgiz – with one exception, see footnote 4 on the poem “The small things” – Sandra, Tô, Damien, Amaranta), while others experiment frequently with newly written material (Yo, Zéor, Chantal Carbon, Ucoc). With a few exceptions, the local regulars are however more likely to appear with written texts – written on anything from the accidental sheet of paper to neat, bounded notebooks.

Certain places as well as certain hosts attract regulars. Regulars at particular places are usually living in the neighbourhood and have attended a slam session by chance and continue to come because it pleases them, or because they like to go to the particular bar or theatre for various reasons anyway. The entourage around persons is either friends or pupils from a workshop who start to attend his or her slam session, before they expand their range of movement to other sessions as well. While the regulars at particular places stay in their neighbourhood, the people who follow certain hosts start travelling from *intra muros* to the *banlieues* or usually vice versa as most ateliers are in the suburbs while the majority of nights are in Paris proper. This opportunity for widening the horizon of people who live in the suburbs is an important aspect of the freedom slam has brought to many people, which I will show an example of in the next chapter.

The Slam Caravane sessions in the suburbs have a slightly higher proportion of youth, as some of the workshops are addressed to youth (without complete success). Saint Denis is a particular case, which can be seen in the statistical break-up of the session (e.g. the 25 April 2007). Out of 35 appearances, 54% were male (thus a better

gender balance than even at L'Atelier du Plateau, due to the fact that all but one of the pensioners were female), 3% were under age 10, 16% between ages 10 and 19, 30% between ages 20 and 29, 27% were between ages 30 and 39, 5% between ages 40 and 49, 3% between ages 50 and 59, and 16% at least over age 60 (all as perceived by me).

Part 2: Wednesday 21 February 2007 at L'Atelier du Plateau

Master Dgiz, the artist and wizard of social relations

By 19:30, half an hour before the session starts, people have already started to trickle in. Many greet each other. *Bisous*, kisses on the cheeks, are exchanged. The room fills up quickly. Some have come early to eat at the restaurant, but most are there just to be sure to be on the list of this night's performers and to have a drink and a chat before it starts. Dgiz goes back and forth, greeting new arrivals, arranging things on his low table at the "stage" – a large bottle of Perrier, his small, blue stuffed penguin, a box of candy to hand out to people, or the like – and jots down names of slammers. When I presented myself for Dgiz the first time, he asked me with a friendly, big smile – common for most hosts eager and glad to create a friendly atmosphere as well as filling their list with names and probably also for seeing new faces in their little "community" – if I wanted to perform a text (*poser une texte*). While some hosts, like 129H at Lou Pascalou, strictly follow the order of arrival, Dgiz, and Abd el Haq at Xango, put together an order based on their knowledge of the performers. Dgiz (in an interview some months after the first session) stated:

I balance them (*équilibrer*). I never know which texts they will interpret, so I don't think about that. I balance humanly. It's a crowd (*foule*) that comes, and I try to make them into an audience, a public (*un publique*). If I've got three rappers, I don't put them one after the other, like a 15 minutes rap session. When there are fewer girls, I don't put them one after the other. I balance and have an eye on it. When there are some slammers with big voice (*gros voix*), when I know there are slammers who one sees easily, then some "slammeuse" who're more into quiet poetry. Turn up the energy, and then lower it again, or the other way around. I pay attention to that. I don't put five slammers in a row whom I know read their poetry softly. Or Natacha and Arthur Ribo who improvise and make it on the spot, because even for them that won't be cool, as the one who comes afterwards will slightly erase the

first.

The aim is to get a good flow, which keeps the attention of the audience as well as letting each performer shine for itself without being overshadowed by others.

At 8 o'clock quite precisely, Dgiz kicks off the evening, sometimes *a capella* but usually, like this session in February, with his double bass. He is wearing a brown hooded sweater with graffiti letters on the front and baggy jeans, and starts with his text "Dgizhors" ("Dgiz outside [of prison]"). The guitarist, in his thirties, white-looking but with a large, brown afro, t-shirt and chequered trousers improvises with him. Dgiz sometimes dresses less like a *jeune de banlieue* than he does today, but his pale, lean face and shaven head, his stooping posture and ingrained uneducated way of talking reveal for most people acquainted with French society a life led far away from official cultural institutions. In the heart of the high culture atmosphere of the spacious white walls of the converted workshop and the theatre-interested audience, this figure playing the classical instrument of the double bass could perhaps be read as an "ill-assorted" symbol. According to Victor Turner, in the liminal phase of the initiation rite "monstrous" and "grotesque" recombinations of cultural components are meant to encourage the participants (neophytes) to reflect on the right order of society (Turner 1967). Were we, the audience, to act according to Turner's description of the initiation, we would be prompted to ask ourselves about the "abnormal" combination of "high" and "low" culture.¹⁴⁰

However, I do not think many of us perceived this as "abnormal", because Dgiz, bodily as well as verbally, appears completely at ease within these surroundings. The bass has become a natural part of his stage persona, and his habitus, as Kapferer (2005b: 49) suggests, is well adjusted within this space of art and culture. Nevertheless, this adjustment has not submerged the symbolism of high culture from the bass and the archetypical "youth from the suburbs" connotations from Dgiz's demeanour. His

¹⁴⁰ As my teacher in French conversation (with an artistic angle) at Alliance Française retorted, visibly horrified, when I suggested that the prolific French rap scene (second biggest in the world) was a proof that French cultural life and language were not in decline: "Even my children can't listen to rap!" She was a very nice and polite woman, and the way she snapped at my remark was quite surprising. I perceive her as a (stereo)typical representative from the French educated, high-culture bourgeoisie, exemplified by her admiration for the, then, conservative prime minister de Villepin's past as a poet as well as his eloquent style of speaking.

appropriation and becoming one with the instrument is therefore still a forceful symbol, showing how elements from Mol and Law's "regional space" of "homogenous banlieue" and "homogenous classical *savoir-faire*" – flow across boundaries and mix, as the aggregated distinctions – "high" and "low", "classical" and "descendant of colonised subjects" dissolve into fluidity.

Dgiz performs the text faster and faster, and he cuts it before the end (of the written version Dgiz 2007), probably in order not to take up too much time. All hosts give a short welcoming introduction where they present the rules. "*Un texte dit, un verre offert*" ("a text said, a glass on the house") is a common motto. Some try to be as quick as possible, in order not to take up too much time, as Yo sometimes emphasises on the very crammed Slam Caravane sessions. Others, like Dgiz and the collective 129H, start the session with an energetic piece that sets the atmosphere and "warms up" the audience.

After "Dgizhors", they continue instrumentally for a short while before Dgiz moves on with the introduction to the evening, still playing with sounds and homonyms. This is an abridged version from February 2007:

...Some say, ladies and gentlemen, that slam is without music, it's certain that they're not musicians [people laugh]. The music was there well before the olives [laughter, as he is playing on the name of the guitarist: Olivier], well before the telly [*télé*, again playing on the name *Lété*, but this time by sound association, not meaning], and well after today... I ask you to welcome, this evening, Olivier *Lété*! [People applaud].

A short intermezzo with the bass and guitar after the applause, and:

A poem spoken a glass on the house. Five-minute maximum. The registered are on the list already. After 1 February, we are no longer allowed to smoke joints in public places... Please respect this, and do not smoke dope.¹⁴¹ Crush your mobiles and turn off your cigarettes. Welcome

¹⁴¹ I am not sure why he says this, as I have never experienced that people smoke joints indoors during the sessions (but it happens some places afterwards, and at concerts it at least used to be very common before

ladies and gentlemen to this first slam in 2007!

There is applause and he sits down by his low table at one corner of the carpet.

In contrast to most Parisian slam sessions, Dgiz invites a musician to improvise with the poets. During the four 2007 spring sessions, he invited an electric guitarist, a classical flutist, a cellist and a jazz clarinetist and saxophonist. These are all musicians he collaborates with regularly on other projects (the flutist is also the sister of his girlfriend). The musicians and the instruments (except for the electric guitar) come from musical genres quite far from slam poetry, considered in France as “urban” or “street culture”. This mixing of artists originating in the slam milieu with more classically recognised art genres like jazz, classical and particularly contemporary music is common in France.¹⁴²

Balancing diversity: of style, age and gender

The first slammer up, I have never seen before. He is a white-looking man in his late twenties with short hair and a little goatee, a large cotton scarf in beige and brown pyjama like clothes performing, improvises it seems, as he walks around and gesticulates, an impersonal story about Thanksgiving, turkeys, Native Americans (*Indiens*), a *grand corps noir* and jazz in the US. I do not get a clear idea of it, neither when I was there nor through watching my video recording afterwards.

While the first slammer drags on and is neither witty nor personal nor enthralling, the next one is all these three, in addition to prompt and to the point. His shirt and pullover and combed hair contrast as well to the casual, slightly hippie or “new age”

the ban on smoking indoors). Perhaps there has been a change in behaviour recently? I think he says this to be funny and to comment on the new law on smoking indoors in public spaces. It’s my impression that people have been restrictive on smoking indoors for quite a long time when there are children present. Later in the evening this usually degenerates (and the children have left).

¹⁴² When I first discovered this, my initial reaction was that the slammers and their texts were somehow appropriated or co-opted by the cultural establishment. It was hard to hear the words which competed with the loud, improvised music, and the concert took place in a grandiose suburban concert hall full of white, middleclass people, while outside there were mostly black hip-hop style clad people. (I aired this view early in my fieldwork in my blog post http://www.antropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2007/art_in_the_suburbs, accessed 19.09.2011). Except for Damien and Antoine (Tô) (see their view on the “subsidised guys” in Chapter 8, no slammers seemed to agree with me or see my point. Later, when I started to grasp what the conservatory in the deprived suburb of Gennevilliers had done to help Dgiz out of his difficulties and later what the artistic collaborations did to his life and his work, I started to change my mind on the emancipatory thinking of French cultural politics.

inspired pyjama of the previous performer – as well as to Dgiz’s attire. He is also white, but several decades older than the first and one of the regulars at L’Atelier du plateau but not elsewhere. Always, I was to discover, reading softly and melancholically, short, personal stories, or free verse poems, from his small black notebook: Today’s text is *les fardeaux des agonies* (“the burdens of death pangs”), apparently about waiting for death in his childhood. He seems shy and sad to the extent of suffering from depression, but his texts often contain an element of bittersweet humour, which makes people laugh. “I grew up in the after-war years. No one listened to me therefore, I sat down facing upwards towards heaven. Neither God listened anymore...”

The introvert and almost immovable man is followed by a woman, also a regular here, in her sixties, sporting a red beret and a black dress: “a poem about love, called *les amoureux*” (“the ones in love”). The story is impersonal, also a stark contrast to the existentially-questioning previous poet. “The man who opened his umbrella the Sunday morning, was a man in love...” She moves her body and punctuates the syllabic rhythm with her right arm as she reads from a collection of A4 sheets. Her voice pitches with the syllables. The guitarist who has been silent during the previous softly spoken story, quietly starts with a few notes, but not as heavily and with fuzz-box as he played during Dgiz’s intro.

“Décroissance” – ideas of “degrowth” in slam

The next is Amaranta, in her early thirties, of Chilean origin and I often bumped into her off the stage as she hung around in Belleville, even after she has moved farther out. Black-haired and dark-eyed, wearing a red plain sweater and black trousers, she finds her pose and stands still, looking straight ahead, knowing her poem by heart, uttering the words with a tinge of anger, as she impersonates her poem *Slamming, It’s my mission, To break the fiction, Sung by Céline Dion...* (See Chapter 1).

Both Amaranta and the next performer, Zéor, are old-timers in the milieu – whom I have encountered many times in various places – and to the extent there exist typical socio-political stances in slam, the two of them come quite close. Their texts are often social analyses and political comments, and both are involved in music – however in different genres; Zéor comes from the rap and DJ scenes, Amaranta sometimes performs

with her guitar (but never at slam sessions).

Zéor, white, 30 years old, grew up in the 13th arrondissement in Southern Paris (an area sharing some socio-political characteristics with the North East, but which is closer to the academic left bank) with parents in managerial positions. His head is shaven and he wears a Carrhart hoodie and black trousers (signalling a certain quite affluent hip-hop and leftwing adherence). He starts off singing in operetta style and continues slowly and with clear diction half reading, half remembering by heart a long text (More than 8 minutes. He was surprised and embarrassed to hear how long it was) about being a commercial manager. Many laughs at the slogan “*j’aime ma planète, je l’achète* – “I love my planet, I buy it”. A slogan the “marketing director” says is “put on plastic bags that we now sell to the customers to sell good conscience.” The text satirises over the “Fair trade” phenomenon, *commerce équitable*: “It’s a business of concepts: biological agriculture – natural plants with a little logo.” The amount of laughter probably says something about how widespread ideas from the décroissance/degrowth movement – an environmentalist, anti-consumerist and anti-capitalist movement inspired by the Situationists¹⁴³ – is in this environment.

The inclusion of *les exclus*

An elderly man, a regular here as well as at other places in the area, reads monotonously, but with a loud voice, from a roll of paper he unfolds and lets hang down as he reads. The staccato way he reads gives the impression that he has not practiced much. The text is impersonal, about a chemist working in a laboratory (concerning AIDS). It is quite long and is not greeted with more than polite applause. His long beard, black woollen hat and large woollen jumper, which he wears indoors, and his rucksack – all a bit unkempt – make me wonder if he might be sleeping rough. He asks me in the break if he can see the video clip I made of him, but as he is not interested in really seeing it when I show it to him (on the display of the camcorder), I get the impression that he just wanted to know whether I filmed him as well. He seems to be pleased to see that I did. My sensations at the time of his performance were a mixture of being bored by his texts but also a satisfaction of seeing someone like him here. Analysing this sensation in hindsight, I

¹⁴³ Source: French and English Wikipedia: Décroissance and Degrowth (accessed 19.09.2011).

think many people in the slam audience like to feel that “we” – the collective slam audience – create an inclusive and warm place when people (who look) like him feel welcome. Listening to a homeless-looking man becomes a strong symbol of the openness and egalitarianism in slam. As Chantal Carbon writes in her black-humoured poem on the slam community *Life’s hard, life’s not easy...*: “And also, it’s true that the general indifference, it’s too horrible, shit! Have to do something! Why do you, when you see a homeless [person] in the street, invite him home?”¹⁴⁴

Quick interludes

A woman around age 50, also a regular here, is next. She is slim, casually, but tastefully wearing a beige woollen long jacket over a dress or tunic printed in mild colours over black trousers. She holds up two envelopes – unmistakably envelopes for bills – and says that her text is short, and that she could not find any other sheet of paper so she used these, which she had found in her letterbox. “I don’t open them because they don’t appeal to me. They look depressing. Do you like them?” she asks. She shows us the two half sized envelopes and we can hear the sound of the plastic from the windows. A child behind me shouts “yes!” and people laugh. She starts reading, but knows the text quite well. The poem starts with a philosophical quest: “Following some bold attempts to grasp as essentially as possible that which does not have a name...” (*Suite à quelques tentatives intrépides pour saisir au plus vif, ce qui n’a pas de nom...*). She uses gestures to illustrate and underline the words in her texts, like *col monté* and *prise de col/le* (“high neck” and “held by the neck”/“sticking glue”). Her stage persona is so self-assured that I get the impression that she is a teacher, maybe at lycée level, or from another profession that is used to talking to an audience. The text consists only of three-four sentences, full of rhymes and puns (which also abounded in her presentation of the text), and finishes by the couplet *pour m’aider de sortir de cet entour noir, merci de m’offrir un coup à boire!* (“and to help me to get out of these dark surroundings, please offer me a drink!”) People laugh and applaud, and she theatrically and rudely sticks her hand out to Dgiz, who is still

¹⁴⁴ I come back to Chantal’s poem in Chapter 7, on slam and therapy, and the experience created by the confrontation and inclusion of difference in Chapter 10 on living together and difference.

sitting, in order to get the drink vouchers as quickly as possible. Dgiz laughs as well and with his back to her, he theatrically says *shss* to the audience for them not to reveal the surprise while he shows two fingers up in the air signalling that he gives her two coupons, thus two drinks. The audience laughs at this as well.

The timid man with the black notebook is called up again and Dgiz gives an obviously silly explanation for why he is there for the second time (something like “it wasn’t him, it was his twin brother...”). An unwritten rule in slam apparently says that no one should be called up again before everybody on the list have had their turn. Some in the audience says, mockingly “ahhh...” to express that they understand the silly, meaningless reason he gives. (I think the real explanation is that there are not enough (good) slammers who have signed up for the first session of the year). The fact that he gives an explanation, although overtly silly, indicates perhaps that Dgiz shows the audience that he knows the democratic “rules” of slam and that he would have abided by them if necessary. However, rules without a good flow epitomise aridity, to paraphrase Victor Turner (1982).

The man flips through his notebook. He always recites in the same fashion, melancholic and monotonously, but when he makes a mistake and must correct himself – on how preliminary life is – he, as well as the audience, laughs a little. Dgiz prepares his contrabass. It is a poetic and sombre text on memories of childhood again, with black humour that makes people laugh. Dgiz hits his bass a couple of times exaggerated artistically and people laugh a little again. It works all right with the sardonic slightly self-mocking text, on the misery of human life as usual, which he in the end also connects to the human misery during the Second World War. Olivier plays some chords. The poet turns and looks at the musicians a couple of times. *Bravo!* Dgiz and someone else exclaim at the end.

“The revolt of the royalists”

The next one is a blond woman in her late forties, dressed in tight black jeans and a hooded slim-fitted black sweater. She clutches an A4 sheet and says she dedicates this text to – with a slight pause – Ségolène Royal (candidate for the Socialist Party in the upcoming presidential elections), and to why she does *not* vote for her. “Do you know

her?” the child asks. The woman reads her text with force, shouting out the words and the resonances and rhythms, in a way that reminds me of Pilote le Hot, the founder and pivotal figure of the other, competitive “branch” of Parisian slam. Her body movements, bending slightly backwards, with the pelvis in front, moving from side to side in tune with the music, also remind me of Pilote’s way of performing. Sometimes she raises her voice and gesticulates, spelling some words by the syllable. The guitarist switches between maracas and playing loudly with fuzz-box, and Dgiz as well plays loudly. The contrasts with the previous one are wide-ranging: Intensity, loudness, body movements, gesticulations and content – personal and existential versus political, sad and melancholic versus revolting and spirit rising. Zéor whispers in my ear: *la revolte de royalists*, a pun on the socialist leaders’ name, which I interpret to mean a bourgeois, thus not very profound, protest.

A political contextualisation of the slam milieu might be helpful here: Presidential candidate Sarkozy was viewed with outright hostility by many in this milieu, and people often booed at the sound of his name. This way of expressing a political opinion is common at many other arenas as well in Paris, for instance at academic seminars and debates. Ségolène Royal was not viewed positively in the slam milieu either. In January before the election, the collective 129H had received an e-mail from Royal’s campaign committee, asking them to join a “Ségo Slam” initiative. The e-mail circulated in the milieu, as an example of a dangerous and repulsive attempt of political cooption of the free artistic expression of slam. Seemingly, 129H did not take into account the political opinions of Royal when they rejected to participate. Nevertheless, that was obviously the case with Zéor’s comment to the performance: He dismissed the Socialist Party for not being radical enough in their political outlook.¹⁴⁵

“Brakeless Orpheus” – a lesson in lyricism

Tô (from Antoine) is called up with a pun to his stage name (a homonym to *tôt*, “early”).

¹⁴⁵ I know of at least one person from a slam session who participated in Royal’s campaign, but he was not part of the inner circles of the community, if he even had any friends there at all. I heard was people criticising this slammers’ text for being simplistic and a “stereotypical PS view of *les banlieues*”. Dgiz, on the other hand, represented a different take on the cooperation with politicians, a position I heard Tô questioning him about and doubting. Dgiz performed both at the campaign for the Communist candidate Marie-José Bouffet and the Green’s candidate José Bové. The morning after the victory of Sarkozy in the first round, he contacted Royal’s campaign to hear if he could be of any help.

Other voices take part in the act – *à bientôt alors* (“see you soon then”) etc. On his way between the chairs, he shakes hands with people who greet him performatively while he takes off his winter jacket. Dgiz communicates with several other people as this goes on (the Ségolene-dedicator comes up to him, apparently as she had forgotten to get her voucher, and Dgiz asks another person if s/he wants to come up right away), all creating a rather messy interlude as a continuation of the high volume of the pervious performance.

Tô is in his mid thirties, is bald and wears a linen olive shirt over an orange sweater, and baggy grey trousers. He always knows his texts by heart, and I have never heard him fumble. He seems to be one of the few slammers who never fail to elate the audience with his intense stage presence and poetic language. I have heard a lone voice complain that the phrases are all beauty and no substance and his background from theatre and theatre school makes what he does too professional to be pure slam.¹⁴⁶ Tô is nevertheless one of this writer’s absolute favourites, and clearly others’ as well, as he has won several slam poetry competitions in his earlier years. He waits a few seconds for the audience to calm down, just standing quietly, concentrating perhaps, while he scratches his elbow relaxed and absentmindedly. Then, a verse full of beauty both in its meaning and in its lyrical composition: *Je suis braise dévalant des vallées sans chemin [...] Je suis danse de fées et rie aux éclats Je suis Orphée sans frein*. (“I am glowing embers tumbling down the valley without ways [...] I am fairy dance and burst of laughter I am brakeless Orpheus”). See Coda to Chapter 8 for the full poem).

One can sense the fact that Tô (Antoine) is used to being on stage, a professionalism that blends well with his natural charisma. This naturalness and everydayness (which also his companion Damien emits, and which they comment upon in the interview I present in Chapter 8) like taking off his jacket on his way up, add to the special character of a slam session with its blurred boundaries between performer and audience, stage persona and person, play and life.

Contrasts in a row

I experienced Tô’s performance as an artistic, virtuous climax, and the contrast to the

¹⁴⁶ The phrasing went something like: Uppercut “write with the dictionary between their legs” (*écrire avec le dictionnaire entre leurs cuisses*).

next one is stark. Veronique is a regular at many venues. She is in her mid- to late 40s, in jeans and dark jumper, reading a long text from an A4 notebook, a pacifist text against the notion of a “good war” (*une bonne guerre*), thus an attack on the attempt to hide a meaning under a (contradictory) concept similar to Zéor’s ridiculing of the concept of a fair trade. She does not know the text very well, but she enlivens her plain reading with some notes from a children’s song, some agitated speech, and a little laughter. The text and reading is perhaps a little too monotonous and long, and I can see that Dgiz, among others, sometimes turns inwards in a thoughtful mode. He wakes up again when she sings some lines, but shakes his head as if to shake away sad or bad thoughts. During the session, I notice from the expressions on his face and his small lapses of concentration, that there is something on his mind.

“One mustn’t pollute!” (*faut pas polluer*), says the active little child behind me as a comment to Dgiz’s introduction of the next slammer, Captain Haddock, saying something about an oil slick, *maré noire*. “That’s true, one shouldn’t pollute,” Dgiz answers.

Captain Haddock – a regular here, and I have also seen him at Pilote’s sessions – recites from a piece of paper, an impersonal story, as always played out mockingly with dramatic gesticulations that mirror and (mock) elevated poetic language. He’s in his late fifties perhaps older, quite large and wearing a brown captain’s hat and a bulky, dark sailor’s jacket and heavy framed glasses. He often runs around with his arms stretched out like a bird, or like a goal-scoring footballer, or lay down on the floor. At the end, he always takes off his hat and bows deeply to the audience.

Captain Haddock’s humour and mockery are contrasted sharply again by Sophie, slightly younger, or at least she appears younger, as she is slimmer and moves more graciously. She wears tight blue jeans and a tight v-necked, brown sweater. Both are intense in acting out their texts; he jokes and entertains, while she is utterly serious. This gives me the feeling of a slight sorrow and pain. Her text this time is about a woman, presented in the second and third person. She starts right away, from the back of the “stage”, posing, putting her nose in the sky and taking some sauntering steps with her long, colourful silk scarf dangling: *Dur, sec et froid* (“hard, dry and cold”). She continues with a line in English: “Walking in the street, walking, walking,” acting out the

gait of a self-conceited woman. “Alone.” Sophie always knows her texts by heart, but often clutches a small piece of paper she can glance at if necessary. When she forgets a line this time, *le verre qui casse...* (“the glass breaks...”) a man in the audience quickly repeats the last word, and she gets back on track. The text feels personal, subjective.

The next slammer, Damien, is also intense and often in the serious vein. Together with Sandra (his girlfriend and mother to his two young children), both in their early thirties, and Tô, a few years older, they make up Compagnie Uppercut, who sets up shows and workshops. He has short dark hair and wears casual clothes, jeans and a thin, red sweater. One hand in his pocket, the other underlines the words in an everyday manner. *Nous, les poètes slammeurs* (“We, the slam poets”). He mixes in English as well: *we’re a stone in the shoe, a pain in the ass* (but he would never try to speak English with me). The poem is spoken in an everyday manner and the gestures are so casual that when he falters, whispers “*putain!*” and passes his hands over his face, there is no big break with the stage persona. He quickly regains the words, but seems uninspired. I had talked to him before the session started and heard he had been ill for a while, which might explain the unusual glitch.

Lorent is about 25 years old, from Montreuil, and of Algerian origin (I have seen him on several occasions in a t-shirt with a green Algerian flag, and he has also conducted a film project among youth in North Africa). He’s tall and strong built, with dark, curly hair standing up in a Mohawk shape, wearing a long hip-hop looking jacket in grey and blue with a red t-shirt underneath and baggy, red trousers. Dgiz is visibly proud of announcing his successful former student. Lorent’s admiration for his teacher is also observable in many ways (from the way he looks at Dgiz, to some of the rhymes he uses and his quite similar tattoo on his lower arm).

Humans and machines – slam and mechanical society

Dgiz moves the double bass some steps in front after having accompanied Lorent’s recital from the background, and introduces his next song with some words (I did not get it) that make some laugh and a woman react: *C’est assez*, “it’s enough”. Dgiz does not hear what she says or pretends he doesn’t, and some suggestions go back and forth until he repeats the word the little boy proposes – *c’est cassé*, “it’s destroyed” – and starts on

his song “Machine”. Partly improvising, he presents slam as an alternative to “ready made food in mass marketing”, in a similar way that the song contrasts humans to machines and machine-like, automatic behaviour and ways of living one’s life. Slam, as he often says, creates *liens* (“links”), *des passerelles* (“bridges”) *des rapports* (“connections”) – “Public slam! Free poetry! We want to communicate!” – and he thanks the slammers who have come to Atelier du Plateau that night, to “take the mic”, he adds in a deep, monotone, slightly aggressive voice mimicking stereotypical rappers (see next chapter where the usage of the voice to express emotions is discussed), “like the machines,” he jokes, and people laugh. Much of the song is performed as a play with voices: a child’s voice talking about grownups who argue, and – repeating the comment by the child – “pollute too much”. He also refers to the stereotypical rappers again, saying in the same deep, flat voice: *nous, les racailles* (“we the hoodlum”). Both child and grownups laugh at his various impersonations.

Pause

Then there is a break. Some order in the bar, some go outside to smoke.¹⁴⁷ People mingle and chat.

The second set starts with a young, brown girl with a black beret over black, short curls, a red sweater under a brown blouse, black tight trousers. She starts out poetically, by heart, but forgets the text and continues with the same declaiming voice and says faster and faster, “I talk too fast and say whatever and I excuse myself, and hope that I at least can have a voucher for a drink.”

“Individualist society”

Then comes an intervention I have not seen anything like on other slam sessions, and which I – an apparently others as well – struggled to interpret: Is it genuine? A gimmick? An act (as contrary to a “sincere” slam)? A man in his (late?) thirties, with a goatee, dark

¹⁴⁷ In a later session, they are asked to move farther away from the entrance, as the neighbours upstairs have complained and even thrown water down. Noise outside and complaints from neighbours are common problems for most slam sessions. This problem has increased considerably for bars and restaurants in general after the 2007 ban on smoking in public indoor spaces.

straight hair combed to one side, grey woollen jumper with a zipper, holding his black bounded A4 notebook (all giving a rather meticulously impression compared to the more rugged or casual style of most slammers and slameuses his age¹⁴⁸) in one hand, underlining his speech with the other.

Oui, je suis un citoyen comme vous, et en colère (“Yes, I am a citizen like you, and angry”), he reads. *I’m an actor, I work little, thus there are days it’s very hard to live. Because for me, it is important to express myself. My body has a great need to express itself, with gests, to get out what I live, what I express, what I feel. It is a shortage, a frustration. I suffer. Also questioning, because I have now lived from my job as an actor for eleven year. And when I hear “no”, “no”, “no” and “no”, for different jobs, I ask the question; “why?”* [Some are laughing.] *What do I have to do? What can I live from? Maybe writing.* [More laughter.] *Or work in another country, if I don’t find work. All that makes me think about our society. Individualist. – Waaa, from the audience. Oui, monsieur!* He points his finger in the direction of the voice, *individualist. Lacking points of reference... she [the society] closes herself in on herself and she becomes intolerant. Racist. Moralising. Materialist. The values like altruism, aid, comprehension/understanding, love, become rare.* He speaks slowly, with anger, uttering clearly every word, emphasising with the free hand. *Certainly, certainly, France has unemployment and she questions herself on what’s called globalisation, in quotation marks. But she is a rich country in a world where the misery is so widespread. Thus, in this period of the presidential campaign, we will not make the wrong choice. And contrary to that lady we heard a little while ago,* waving his hand in the direction of the audience, and the guitar sounds louder, *that blonde, “Françoise,” she says, Françoise, fantastic.* Some are laughing, some are clapping. *I,* he hits his fist on his chest, before he waves it in the air, *I, ladies and gentlemen, I will anyway vote for Royal!* With stress on every word.

¹⁴⁸ Slammers in their late 40s and upwards tend to dress more formally, or neater, but this distinction is far from absolute.

Royal! He shouts and people laugh, some clap, some whistles. *Because she's the candidate that we've got.* There's a lot of noise. Zéor comments, aloud this time, but I do not get what he says, only that he disagrees. *In this society, where is the revolt, ladies and gentlemen?! "The royalists!"* a mocking voice says. He continues for some lines more, and the guitar player continues as well, but there is much noise in the audience. *Please listen.* People laugh even more. Someone says hush. *Tonight, I would like us think of the people who are our stars, pointing upwards, and who teach us to live and to reflect. I think of Abbé Pierre,*¹⁴⁹ the noise breaks out again, some clap, some laugh. *Coluche*¹⁵⁰ *other people who were good people...*

I am not quite sure how to understand the audience's unusually noisy reaction to his performance. There and then, I found him to be ridiculous and over the top, and again representing a rather bourgeois (thus shallow), and theatrical and exotic revolt.¹⁵¹ After watching the video several times, I conclude that the audience is divided. Dgiz follows up with his satirical *ça r commence* (meaning "it re-begins", but also plays on the nickname for Sarkozy, "Sarko"). As the song is a – more personal than political – satire over Sarkozy and his private life, it suggests that Dgiz comments on and acknowledges what he sees as a serious intervention. As I will examine in the next chapter, he judged the "law and order" policy of the right wing to be of severe consequences for a whole generation in the suburbs.

Dgiz goes straight from the last line of the song to introducing Marie-Françoise.

¹⁴⁹ Abbé Pierre was a highly revered person who has set up a well-known charity for homeless people, and who had recently died.

¹⁵⁰ Coluche: a music-hall and film actor who satirises politics and takes social stances, notably by setting up a charity distributing food for poor people; *Les Restos du Coeur* (Restaurants of the Heart). Source: French Wikipedia. Coluche. (Accessed 19.09.2011).

¹⁵¹ I later discussed a similar ambivalent – is it serious, is it acting – performance with Damien and Tô., In their opinion this kind of intervention illustrates well the problem of much French theatre as being unable to create a *true relation* with its audience. People will feel it is not genuine, it lacks "sincerity", unlike most pure or true slam performances, at the same time as the audience does not feel touched and concerned by the usage of theatrical conventions, were Damien and Tô's judgement of many performances by professional actors at *L'Atelier*. I am not sure if this concerned this particular man as well, but it might have. More from this discussion in Chapter 8.

Maurice Papon and the re-appropriation of French history

The following poem, I perceive to be one of the strongest of the evening. Not because of its sensitivity and poetic quality like in Tô's performance, but because of the subject matter and the way it was done this particular night. Marie-Françoise showed clear commitment to the story she was telling, and Dgiz contributed in a poignant way. The poem and performance are analysed in Chapter 10.

Marie-Françoise, a retired schoolteacher approaching her seventies, is fairly used to having everyone's attention and good at putting together a poem. She is a quite tall, sturdy woman, today wearing a long, brown woollen jumper and plum red trousers, with large glasses and her dark grey hair hanging loose: *I don't think Sarko will be better than Ségo*, she says as an introduction holding a hand in front of her eyes to avoid the strong light. *Merci*, says the woman with the dedication to Royal. *Maybe I'll vote tactically and vote for Sego*, Marie-Françoise continues. She lifts her arms in a disarming manner. *Now, I will talk about a man who was buried today*. I would guess most people knew whom she was talking about, as there had been much media coverage of the death of Maurice Papon (the former chief of police responsible for, among other things, the massacre of 17 October 1961 and who will be thoroughly presented in the translation of Marie-Françoise's text in Chapter 10). She knows her poem by heart, standing on one spot and moving slowly with the words, slightly gesticulating, to give emphasis to certain words. Dgiz plays his bass slowly but with emphasis, whispering the name of the dead chief of police.

"It's the life of the texts; we must leave them alone"

Sandra is already standing, waiting, when an exchange on whether to comment on the texts erupts. A woman, probably "Françoise" (the Royal-dedicator), the same who has spoken aloud several times that evening, has obviously made a comment that I did not write down or film. I start filming in the middle of Dgiz's answer: "...we say nothing" (...*on dit rien*). She argues, "but there are texts that appeal to other texts. It [the urge?] is stronger than me" (*Il y a des textes qui appellent d'autres textes. C'est plus fort que moi.*). "Yes, I know. I, too, I want to. *Oui, je sais. Moi, aussi je veux*. Dgiz mimes a megaphone curbing his hands in front of his mouth: "Hey! What's that?!?" *Hey! Qu'est-ce que tu*

fais?!?” He seemed to illustrate that to intervene could easily turn into an argument. She objects, but he ends the discussion by shrugging his shoulders and sits down: *C’est la vie de textes, faut les laisser tranquille*. “It’s the life of the texts, and we must leave them alone”.

This is an extremely important aspect of the ethos of slam, and I would like to expand on it briefly. In an interview, Dgiz emphasises that he never comments on other people’s texts:

Because it’s an abuse of power. The five minutes are for the slammers, they belong to them. [...] I say nothing even if it is positive, if I’m moved [...] I think that’s why people respect and like my sessions. They [the performers] are never materialised, made into objects: “Look, I’ve got an object, and I show it to you!”

With the last sentence, his voice changes to that of a salesperson, speaking fast and with excessive emotion. I have never heard any hosts comment on texts, on this they all agree. Some and Yo in particular, however, often introduce the slammers with a comment (e.g. his favourite performers, the appearance of women etc. in order to make people relax and feel comfortable, Yo explains). MC Tsunami has even more strict opinion on the subject than Dgiz:

I think you’ve never heard me say; “and now someone I love very much, and now, my favourite slammer. Or now, a woman I don’t know but who’s really very beautiful,” or things worse than that. Never a reflection on my friend, on my artistic preferences, even if it’s my best friend, if it’s someone I adore, someone I’m happy to see on stage. Never differentiate, [...] that means to imply that he is better than the others. Because when an *animateur de scène slam* says: “and now my favourite slammer who’s better than the others, thus better than you who’ve just spoken,” when a host make a reflection on the looks of a woman, he says “and you, the ugly, you, you fat, you, who is an idiot. [...] I don’t understand how other hosts do not see to what extent it is

important philosophically at all levels, humanly, deontologically, to present every slammer exactly in the same way.

Yo and Tsunami appear as two poles in a continuum of ways to present performers. My overall impression is that most of what Yo does is taken with a grain of salt, but since he is entertaining it passes. Tsunami, on the other hand, is considered outright boring by some, which seems far worse. On the other hand, he is highly praised by a few others in being egalitarian and firm concerning disturbances. Dgiz, who respects no noise, but might present performers with a little story or epithet (“my friend” and the like, never distinguishing in quality and never in a gender biased vein), reaps widespread respect and appraisal.

Back in medias res: Sandra starts.

All the restrained cries in the name of a correct life

Sandra, in her early thirties (has two young children with Damien), with long straight and dark hair, in black trousers and a black jacket over a red t-shirt: *Last night, at 8 o'clock, I sold my soul to the devil*. She always recites by heart, always poetic, and with a strong stage presence. Standing steadfast, looking at the audience, reciting the text with emotion and anger, moving her hands and arms flowing and ebbing with the development of the text. The guitarist plays melodically, without fuzz. Like her colleagues Damien and Tô in Uppercut, Sandra's texts often treat existential issues or struggles. Her language is at least as lyrical as Tô's, reminding me more than any in the milieu of the imagery (the combination of the profane and the sublime) and technical craftsmanship of Baudelaire. In addition, while it is possible to at least hint at Tô's expressive force through translating his metaphors, Sandra's play with sounds and imagery is almost impossible to do justice to. Like Dgiz and Tô's texts, hers as well seem to be about a struggle, but rather than concretely in terms of hard living conditions like in “Dgizhors”, and an existential quest like in Tô's, her struggle seems to be against conventions, religious and others, of how to lead a good life.

Russian, and human suffering

Sandra is followed by an instrumental piece by the musician. A woman in her sixties, a regular at the Atelier, but not elsewhere, starts with a melancholic Russian song. The guitarist lets her sing by herself, only following the rhythm hitting the guitar with the plectra, but he takes up improvising when she starts reading from her sheet of paper. She speaks with pain in her voice, half looking down at the text, and half looking at us. The text focuses on a destructive, invasive “she,” the pain (*douleur* fem.) that suddenly overruns her. *She never leaves me, my pain. ... So, she will calm down. Maybe.*¹⁵²

The next appearance also starts with an *a cappella* song, and is sad and painful, to the extent of bringing tears to my eyes. Afro – in his late twenties, perhaps – was not there from the beginning, but obviously signalled to Dgiz that he would like to perform. Dgiz lets him come up right away. He is still wearing his brown duffle coat, the hood over a large brown woollen hat with a brim, and he has not even taken off his rucksack as he gets in front of the audience and nods to the guitarist (presumably he asks for no accompaniment) before he folds out a sheet of paper. Someone, perhaps Dgiz, asks if he is cold. Dgiz suggests that he takes off his coat and people laugh, but Afro ignores, or is too concentrated to hear the comments. He finishes folding out the paper and has turned toward the audience but does not lift his head from his paper, indicating – to me at least – inner pain.¹⁵³ He starts singing with a clear voice, in a slightly sad tone. *Ma rime / c'est un art, / comme un flamme dans une fuit / d'essence*. “My rhyme is an art, like a flame in a leakage, of petrol.” He continues reading. The text seems to be about life. *Demain inch'Allah je garde ma chance*. “Tomorrow, Inch’Allah, I keep my luck”. He sings some of the lines. His West-African accent is sometimes slightly audible to my foreign ear. Suddenly he changes tone, on *je garde l'espoir*, singing, and suddenly: *Je garde l'espoir. Comme le météo*, “I keep up hope. Like the weather forecast,” pronounced mechanically like the meteorologists, but changes again quickly, this time to syllabically rhyming

¹⁵² At another night at L’Atelier, she performed an impersonal story of a very different kind, but also that time she started with a traditional Russian song. She was accompanied by the jazz musician Luis Schlavis who improvised on clarinet, and I remember the moment of her singing as extremely beautiful and evocative. Her two starkly different texts thus illustrate that some slammers play on a wide spectrum of texts and genres, while others are more specialised.

¹⁵³ I have seen him on other occasions and know that it is not because of shyness or lack of stage experience.

poetry, but after a few lines he's back to singing the refrain. He slowly lifts his head and looks at the audience. *La vie c'est un droit. Mais je garde l'espoir.* "Life is a right. But I keep the hope." And changes again into a (rhythmic) discussion on the word *problème*. His performance stands out, and it feels like he's suffering or at least that he is sad, an impression his protective winter clothes strengthen. He has left before the session is over, like he often moves around from one session to another in the same night, in 2006 at least, often together with a couple of friends from the slam scene.

Something completely different

A man around forty, in jeans, white t-shirt and hooded jacket, reading from small sheets of paper a lewd story inspired by Alice in Wonderland. Afterwards he asks: "Who is the original 19th century author?" He whispers the answer to Dgiz, and someone shouts jokingly: "but now Dgiz knows it already". Marie-Françoise says the name, and adds: *I've won a glass, then!*

On commercialism again

Dgiz talks ironically about how one now has to sell records to be a slammer, referring to the media coverage of Grand Corps Malade's success. He comments on the constant misuse of the word "slam" in media coverage as a genre or style, rather than a place with free access to the stage, and while Ecce – a thin man around thirty in wide slightly hippie inspired hemp clothing – gets up on stage with his tambourine. He starts by making a remark to Zéor and his phrase "I love my planet, I buy it". Ecce: *I have to buy, buy, buy what I need, what I need, need, need... to be happy, hap-py, hap-py*. The text continues in the same vein, rhythmically and substantially. Ecce starts playing the tambourine after a while, Dgiz answers *con-tent con-tent* ("hap-py"). Many clap their hands with the rhythm for a short while, until Ecce stops playing and changes rhythm. He speaks softly, murmurs sometimes.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Abd el Haq told me – after Ecce had refused, as the only one ever, to be filmed by me – that Yo once had physically turned him around in order for him to face the audience once he insisted on talking with his back to the people. Perhaps the incident indicates the value given to addressing the audience, thus others, in slam. I will return to this in Chapter 8, on how the essence of slam is to create relations.

Children's songs and the classical tradition of French rap – and the ego and talent of a good MC

The little boy, about four-five years old, in a red jacket and blue jeans, who has been verbally active from the audience the whole evening, gets up in front to loud applause. The “Royal-dedicator” asks his name. Dgiz replies that he can present himself. “But aren’t you going to present him?” *Marius*, the boy replies, and Dgiz introduces him loudly and ceremoniously: *Marius, s’il vous plait!* People clap energetically again. Then, Dgiz obviously a bit annoyed by having been corrected, gets up and makes fun of people asking childish questions to children: “what is your name, what age are you...” *Marius* and the audience laughs. *Allez*, (“come on”) *Marius*, a woman in the audience, probably his mother, says. He sings a children’s song, very bright and beautifully. Dgiz smiles, rests his head in his hand, and after a while finds a cue to starts beat-boxing.¹⁵⁵ But the boy starts laughing, turns to Dgiz and says *arrete!*¹⁵⁶ “Stop!” People laugh loudly. Dgiz holds his hand in front of his mouth, and looks to the side, regretfully defending himself when a woman’s voice criticises: *Hush*, she says, and Dgiz retorts, clearly embarrassed: “I wanted to introduce him into the French rap!” Nevertheless, when the boy starts singing and then starts laughing again, he leans back and draws his hood down over his face to emphasise his embarrassment, but removes it quickly as everything goes well. The atmosphere feels a bit tense, but no one makes a sound and the boy finishes perfectly, people applaud, Dgiz gives him a voucher and bends down to face him at his height, pointing to the bar, obviously explaining how to use the voucher.

This scene epitomises well Dgiz’s strength as well as weaknesses as a host, in my eyes. Convivial is the adjective many use to describe his sessions. He seems to understand the human psyche very well and usually manages to make people comfortable in front of the audience. This is clearly the case with the boy who seems perfectly at ease up there with him in the strong light even during the moment when he cannot complete his song. The idea of mixing a classical French children’s song with (classical) French

¹⁵⁵ “Beatboxing is a form of vocal percussion which primarily involves the art of producing drum beats, rhythm, and musical sounds using one’s mouth, lips, tongue and voice. [...] Beatboxing today is connected with hip hop culture” (Source Wikipedia: beatboxing, accessed 5.06.2011).

¹⁵⁶ The child speaks to Dgiz in the singular, not the polite plural which children – at least traditionally – use when they address adults. That he does not use the form here tells either something about the egalitarian and laid-back milieu in general, or that he knows Dgiz well, or both.

rap is innovative and entertaining, and in my opinion it was acceptable of him to defend and explain his decision. Then I think his *ego* – as the natives put it – took over when he makes a clown of himself hiding under the hood, disregarding the obvious fact that this steals attention from the performer, and can even produce laughter, which would be catastrophic for the little boy who has already been struggling to hold back his giggles. (Luckily, but not unsurprisingly, the audience is awake and mindful enough to ignore Dgiz in this instance).

After the child, and probably inspired by him as his text starts with a childish prayer to *Papa Noël*, Father Christmas, for a merguez (North African sausage) in the Christmas basket,¹⁵⁷ Dgiz performs his text *super 'guez*.¹⁵⁸ This is Dgiz's fourth song of the evening (it will be one more), which is two to three more than at other sessions this spring. I have never heard anyone criticise the decision to perform that many times on his own stage, even though the other hosts perform from not at all or as many as two times, as he obviously do not displace others.

“I’m not normal. Like you”

After this humoristic intervention of the sausage, a sharp contrast is created again, this time by Sam. She is a slim girl in her early thirties, in slim fitting black trousers and a thin blouse in light colours with her black hair in thin, tidy rasta braids reaching her shoulders and glasses without frames - all giving a nice and neat impression. She starts with the line: “Do you know how to heal me?” (*sauriez-vous de me guerir*) “White page”. *La feuille blanche*. “You who are far from the hell that I live, can you heal me, from this anorexia”¹⁵⁹ (the other verses say *paralyse*, *heresie*) “which makes me want to die every day that I live.” She speaks with excellent clear diction, accelerating and slowing down, moving her body and her hands with the words, incarnating a slightly

¹⁵⁷ I am not sure if this combination of the Christian Christmas and the (Muslim) sausage is an intended hybrid on Dgiz's part (like Grand Corps Malade in Saint Denis: “at Carrefour you can even buy Halal Sauerkraut”) or if it is a completely natural combination for a non-religious Frenchman who grew up in a diverse suburb.

¹⁵⁸ The history of the superhero Superguez – Dgiz's way of conceptualising the immigrant population in France – comes in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁹ As I will show in the next chapter, many use slam as therapy. Texts *directly* treating issues of anorexia, incest, violence, alcoholism etc are however rare. Usually, such sensitive issues are reformulated in highly poetic ways. Once, however, did I read a post on Facebook that was surprisingly open about anorexia, an openness several commentators remarked positively on.

neurotic, suffering woman. “I’m not normal. Like you.” She continues moving her hands also after she has stopped talking and is about to leave the limelight, which gives a further impression of a strong identification to her text.

Men and women

The next is a woman around thirty, in orange coloured tight stonewashed jeans with a broad belt, a striped, short jumper in orange and other bright colours, all giving a lively impression, quite different from the tidy and chic woman of the same age that preceded her. After finding her position, she turns to Dgiz and signals that he should accompany her – and some people laugh as he quickly gets up to do his duty – and what comes is – in my opinion a very successful accompaniment from his part. When he has picked up the double bass and stands behind her, she starts with a cry – half operetta and half crazy sounding – and continues with “the guys pout” (*les mecs se font la gueule*), “the guys piss on the floor, the guys drink beer, drink until they roll around on the floor...” She starts dancing with unrestrained movements. It’s a sarcastic and humorous song about men. He stands behind her playing the bass and mimics with her words, nodding when she says something seemingly positive about men, and hides under his hood with the negative. In the end, as she stretches her arms in the air during the last lines, he holds the double bass up behind her and smiles ambivalently. Although everything is happening behind her back, the singer appears a confident performer, which Dgiz seems to know, perhaps. I’ve seen her here at other occasions, but not elsewhere. Dgiz commented afterwards that there had been many professionals present – meaning people from the world of theatre I suppose. Anyway, it is clearly done respectfully as he is for the most part playing “the guy” she makes fun of, and in the way making a tribute to her victorious gesture in the end. The guitarist drums on his guitar and many are clapping the rhythm. Heavy applause follows, and a bubbly atmosphere, which spills over to the next performance.

A short man whom I’ve seen on many scenes, who writes extremely naïve, childlike poetry, is next. He picks up on the melody of the previous song, and imitates the pitch in the woman’s voice: “The women make us bored...” Many in the audience laugh and whistle, and Dgiz, standing beside him, leaning over his bass, laughs heartily. The man finishes the pastiche and people applaud before he starts on his real performance.

The text consists of a long list of names with a brief personal description. In the beginning people laugh, but then it drags on.

Grand Corps Malade clone

The next is a (black) man I have seen neither before nor after. He reads in a not very rehearsed fashion from an A4 sheet, a text about the place where he lives, *c'est vrai que porte de Vincennes est de la balle...* ("It's true that Port de Vincenne is awesome...") A text that both thematically (however a bit mockingly) and rhythmically copies the style of the successful slammer Grand Corps Malade.

The next performer has not prepared anything and it seems apparent that he is just doing it for the free drink (He is an acquaintance and dealer of a friend and musical colleague of Dgiz). It becomes quite funny anyway, because it is late in the evening and so far out – with Dgiz who is quite short standing on a chair with his bass to be as tall as the other man who is extremely tall, and the two of them improvise a little sketch.

Towards the end

Dgiz improvises an outro to the evening, thanking the people present, which moves from lalala singsong with the audience, to punk riffs on the double bass. Towards the end, he re-presents the "tramp/vagabond" looking man, who reads another text monotonously like the first time. Ending with *abstention!* He is obviously referring to the earlier texts and comments concerning the upcoming elections.

Then Saër, an ancient in Parisian slam, enters the theatre and is called up while he is still wearing his winter coat and hat. He recites a classical 19th-century poem in a quiet, sensitive way.

Improvisation

Dgiz seems to be treading water as he chats with the audience, and improvising over the notion of "bouquet finale" (crowning piece). Maybe it is too early to end, at the same time there does not seem to be anyone who has more to say? As the audience soon finds out is the case – he has received a text message from someone who is soon to arrive. "Those who want to come up here and do the integral bouquet finale all together can do

that, those who are hungry (argot: *ont d'la dalle* rhymes with *integrale*) can wait two more minutes to taste Joan's super cooking." He waves with his hand and the audience applauds as they see that another prominent figure, Arthur Ribo, has just arrived. He is in his early 30s, but is tired looking, in a bohemian sort of way, one could say? His way of dressing is plain, a dark fleece jacket, zipped up to his chin and jeans, his wavy dark hair untidy. When he comes up to Dgiz, they act as if they don't know each other, shaking hands and presenting themselves. Dgiz repeats jokingly to the audience: *Arthur!* The joke works because most people present knows Arthur, and probably that the two of them know each other well (probably even that Arthur started his rapid and successful career in one of Dgiz's numerous workshops).

Arthur Ribo's diction is loud and clear, his voice sonorous. He starts by slowly repeating: "Bouquet finale..." He is one of only a handful of slammers who improvises. He is quite new to the milieu, but his career has accelerated and he started quickly with his own shows where he improvises over words suggested by the audience, titled "The concert where you are the author" (*le concert dont vous êtes l'auteur*). At the time of fieldwork, he also struggled with a record deal, which apparently turned out to be very unfavourable for him. Wicked tongues criticise him for using the slam scene as a stepping-stone for launching his own career, a way of behaving which would damage his integrity as slammer because it is contrary to the slam ethos of "passing the baton" (a collective emphasis I will return to in the following chapters). Others point to him as an example of how the slam phenomenon can be political in innovative and intervening ways, as he was active for the *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants), an involvement he minimises himself when I ask him about it.

Arthur starts the improvisation humorously by wanting to excuse himself to a woman, but lost the bouquet of roses on the way, then moves on to talk about himself – *J'arrive ici, seul, sale*, ("I come here alone, dirty"). He gestures with the words – during the recession, and how much he is working (which he talked to me about afterwards) and the work of slammers, dissecting the cue words by the syllables, and playing on homonyms. Dgiz gets up and go over to him after a minute or two, after Arthur has glanced down at him to get some assistance – singing the syllables of *Bou-quet Fi-na-al-e*

to the tune of The Internationale.¹⁶⁰ Arthur raises his fist and lets his gaze wander over the audience continuing with a strophe from the real Internationale, which Dgiz apparently does not know. Arthur also stops suddenly, either because he does not know the continuing, or because the two of them want to give the word – opening their eyes wide, (theatrical) impressed or surprised as they look in the direction of the voice – to a woman in the audience who sings the continuing loud and clear for a few seconds, as another person shouts: waaai!¹⁶¹ As the voices silence, Dgiz continues improvising, obviously having been re-inspired by Arthur's intervention: *Bouc emissaire* ("scapegoat"), *sentir le bouc* ("to stink"), Carole Bouquet (French actor and model) etc.

Arthur finishes and leaves the stage. Arthur Ribo, as Lorent, started in one of Dgiz's many workshops. Dgiz says that he gets tears in his eyes when he reads about people in magazines who have succeeded after they started rapping or slamming with him. I have watched him in workshops and on the street engaging in conversations with youth, and it is clear that he excels as much in social-artistic work as he does with pure artistry – and he knows it. With his former students, he does not exhibit any kind of jealousy or competitiveness, only paternal pride. There is always someone from his old workshops turning up on his slam sessions, and he is always inviting one or more to have a guest appearance at his concerts, a typical example of how one is expected to "pass the baton" in the milieu.

Dgiz continues a short while about "the final bouquet of flowers" and ends by exclaiming *c'est fini, ce souk?*¹⁶² (You're finished with that racket/hullabaloo?") He then asks the melancholic man with the notebook up for the third time, hailing him in rhymes

¹⁶⁰ Some slammers, among them Nada, would probably be familiar with this, but I am quite certain that Dgiz does not know that the author of "The Internationale" was very active in the 19th-century precursor to slam, the goguettes, equally abundant in Belleville as slam is today. Dgiz most likely associated with "L'Internationale" because of the first verse ending with *lutte finale*, "final struggle". It is, however, quite indicative of slam to replace a word like "struggle" with "bouquet".

¹⁶¹ To me, this incident indicates that although slam is a (predominantly) left-leaning phenomenon, it attracts few from organised party politics of the left and extreme left who presumably would have known and liked to sing the Internationale. Tõ's poem – "The Orphans", quoted in Chapter 1 – illustrates quite well, in my opinion, the political disillusion reigning.

¹⁶² *Souk* means market in Arabic and became part of the French language during the colonial period. In its figurative sense it is negative and means disorder, chaos. Many Arab words that entered the French language in this period received negative or pejorative connotations. Dgiz often uses this kind of "Frenchified" Arab words with pejorative meaning. I will discuss this issue in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minoritarian usages of major languages in Chapter 10, "I write French in a foreign language": The universal human and difference.

in accordance with the bouquet finale improvisation. The guitarist has been playing quite loudly (but without fuzz) as both Arthur and Dgiz have spoken loudly and the atmosphere has been quite festive. The soft-spoken man raises his voice to announce the name of the poem *un poème de mort* (“death” instead of “love”, *d’amour* – only one different phoneme), and first looks at, then signals with a hand to the guitarist that he must stop. The guitarist nods and says; “I’ll finish,” and lets the notes slow down and fade out after a little musical intermezzo. This time the poet reads from a collection of poems, *Récit des guerres aphrodisiaques* (“Story of the aphrodisiac wars”), which I realise must be his own, as it reminds strongly of his other texts from the notebooks.¹⁶³

Many leave quickly after the session is finished in order to catch the last metro. It is common for events in Paris and the close suburbs to adjust their schedule to the last metro in the weekdays, so they usually end around 23:30. To keep good relations with neighbours might also be a good reason for ending abruptly at this time.

After the majority of people have left, some linger on. Some have dinner from Joan’s kitchen, as Dgiz always promotes at the end of the set when he also thanks the crew at L’Atelier. He himself eats free after the session, as is common for many of the hosts at various sessions. However, most just sip a glass of wine or beer, mingle, and talk. At the end of the session, people start smoking indoors and one can smell a faint scent of cannabis. This after-party can last for up to a couple of hours, and some might be continuing somewhere else afterwards. The rest disperse.

¹⁶³ After a search on the Internet, I discover that Josephaë, as is his name, is a poet and painter with several published collections of poems and expositions. On his homepage, the poet’s self-presentation confirms the impression I received of him from his poetry. He also illustrates perfectly how poetry, and particularly the public uttering of one’s poetry, can give essential meaning to life for people with existential struggles. Further, he illustrates the slammer Chantal Carbon’s point (see the end of Chapter 7) that in order to make your pains into art for others, you have to have overcome them. Then, if you base your poetry on your own overcome pain, you can touch others. Josephaë, the poet, writes (my translation):

For me, poetry is a joy and a sad enthusiasm, an unshakable love, an outlet, a divine passion, a heart revived by eternity that I had to suffer ... Poetry help me to live, it’s like a drug, but a literary drug: If I stop writing, I stop living. My writing is morbid, but it is a form of therapy ... I am under affective anaesthesia. Art, the eternal therapy of misfortune (*malheur*)
<http://josephae.com/> (accessed 6.06.2011).

There are several explanations why Dgiz does not give attention to the poet’s prominent literary background. First, Josephaë is obviously a very adherent regular, so many already know him. Second, Dgiz perhaps does not know about his publications, and the poet seems not of the most self-assertive kind. Third, many hosts at slam sessions are careful not highlight certain artists at the expense of others. Normally, Dgiz would mention if it is a particularly close friend, or if someone has just released an album or arranges a slam session in the near future.

Summing up the session: contrasts and fluid dynamics

A session should be “balanced” in relation to gender, energy level and performance style, hosts Dgiz and Abd el Haq state. They thus make use of contrasts to make sure the session gets a “good flow”. When I carefully went through the video material from Atelier du Plateau, I noticed there were a number of contrasts Dgiz could play on, consciously or unconsciously. A large variety in age and ethnic background add to the diversity many appreciate in Parisian slam. In addition, I found at least four axes of contrasts in terms of content of the texts: First and second, the two continuums between *talent and not so talented* and – independently – *experienced and inexperienced* – in poetics and artistry. After a fumbling but cute and humanly warm or an outright boring performance, it feels good to watch a real artist. Perhaps also vice versa, after a self-assured professional it might be refreshing to see an unpolished amateur. Third, and independently of the first two axes, there is *the personal, subjective versus the impersonal*. The texts “Dgizhors”, “Brakeless Orpheus”, the ones by the melancholic man (Josephaë), the “Russian” woman, Sandra, Sam (anorexia) are all examples of the first, while Zéor’s marketing director, the Vagabond’s, the entertaining woman with the bills and Marie-Françoise’s text on Maurice Papon are very varied examples of the latter. A fourth axis I have discerned, I established between *political and existential content*. The political can in this case be divided between those directly related to the elections (the Royal-dedicator, the actor’s intervention and Marie-Françoise’s comment before her text proper), while more general social analysis can be found in most of Dgiz’s texts and in Zéor, Amaranta and Ecce’s texts (the three latter on consumerism). The ones treating existential, inwardly human themes, in contrast to political issues, are most notably Josephaë and the three from *Companie Uppercut*: Tô, Damien and Sandra, but also the Russian woman and Afro.

The way the contrasts overlap and slide, fade and mix – as on continuums, not dichotomies – together with the constant physical movements and changing and overlapping rhythms of sounds and activities – contribute to the particular sense of motion of a slam session. Boundaries blur and lose any absoluteness, as the river flows –

sometimes slowly, sometimes in cascades, but often in idiosyncratically swirling eddies – between the riverbanks.

Chapter 7

The art of bare necessity: Poetry and therapy

La poésie opère comme une lumière mangeuse d'ombre
("Poetry acts like a light eating the shadow")

Souleymane Diamanka, in *Les poètes se cachent pour écrire* ("The poets hide to write")

Life's hard, life's not easy... (by Chantal Carbon)^{iv}

I will start this chapter with a poem by Chantal Carbon, which in my opinion accurately and powerfully, as well as humoristically, describes the central features of the slam milieu that will be the scope of this chapter.

For reasons beyond our control, this text is of particular actuality. Any resemblance to persons who have lived is not purely coincidental.

I am indeed forced to take notice of the fact that more than half of the people I know are depressed or high (*chéper*¹⁶⁴) or both. If they aren't straight out dead by accident, overdose or hanging. [...] There're also mixed techniques, like shotguns in the mouth or the eccentrics who drink hydrochloric acid. Yes, yes... Who would have even thought? There you've really got someone who feels bad...

[...] I can't stand other people's problems so I no longer go to slam. Fed up with slavery, police, unhappy love and George Bush. [...]

¹⁶⁴ *Chépe* is verlan (French traditional slang which reverses the order of syllables in a word) of the slang expression *perché*, which means "high" (most likely on drugs) or crazy. The language in this poem is a mix of quite formal or educated French with colloquialisms and slang, which reflects well Chantal Carbon's social background, middleclass with a degree in fine arts, but at the time, she discovered slam "at the margins of everything." She is in her early forties, and a musician, painter and writer. Her ideas behind this text will be fuller presented later in this chapter.

To be left alone, I stay at home and cut off my phone. I don't want to know anything more about misery or the world war, so I've thrown out my telly, turned off my radio and burnt my newspapers.

And then, all by my self in my flat I really lose it and say to myself: yes, one really lives in a world of nutcases.

[...] Furthermore, the people who feel bad tell you their problems. And think undoubtedly that you're their friend and that you haven't anything else to do. Sometimes they even ask for advice. Apparently they haven't got the courage to go to a shrink. Or they're not yet feeling bad enough... When someone asks me for advice, I always keep one or two handy. With a funny, little story. And oops, I cheer you up. Do they then think I feel good or what? That I'm a model of equilibrium? And yet, I haven't the impression to be. Or maybe it's just that I'm not aware of it.

There are people who are even slyer. Who on purpose don't tell you that they feel bad, or who don't tell it in order not to disturb you. Just to go and kill themselves afterwards and then one's forced to feel guilty. That's really not very nice.

[...] Before, I wanted to save the world. I felt a little bit like a super-heroic social assistant. Until the day when a mate, whom I'd cheered up the whole evening died in the morning. Well, I admit, in that case, I must say he didn't do it on purpose.

Well, now all that is finished. They'll sort it out. If they're fed up with life because life is hard and life is not easy, well, it's sure, there's nothing I can do about it. Am I telling them my problems, or what? No, well, then. Except sometimes, or with my mates we sometimes have this competition in symptoms.

I was told recently that there exist people who're doing fine and I'm perfectly willing to believe it. It even seems to me that when one's surrounded by people who're doing fine, life's really a lot easier. Well, I'm willing to believe that also.

Happy people, with stable behaviour, who're not seeing visions, who sleep at night, who don't slash their wrists, who're not alcoholics, in hiding or under THC, who don't take coke or X in belief that it's chic, who don't go to prison, who haven't got the ridiculous idea to purposely nick the social service custody [*D.A.S.S.*], who don't get into trouble at every street corner, who've never been artist, punk, skinhead or Hare Krishna...

People who overcome their difficulties. Good people. Not like me. I haven't got that many difficulties and I still can't overcome them. It's daft. It's the modern world... However, it's proven, and sometimes I've even personally come across people who're doing fine.

In other words, I don't know loads. Yep, there are days when that worries me. Days like that or for All Saints^[165], they inform you of a newly hanged [person] I can cross out from the address book of my existence. Finally, people aren't terrific. Always bore you with their divorce, their exile or their suicide.

As for me, after I decided to be ok, it's been hell. I don't know what to do any longer. I've no more friends. I've lost all my references. I had to change. Tidy up my collection of meat hooks.

Take charge of things. Repaint my walls white. I'm no longer like before. And what luck, as you didn't know me before. I'm incognito in the land of nutters. And I radiate of joie de vivre, yes, yes...

[...] Anyway, if things are going badly, it's certain that I can't do anything about it. I don't give a damn about society, your moods, your poems. We've only come here to make nice puns (*beaux jeux de mots*) and we leave again with the heart utterly brightened up. For five minutes, we believe it. Yeah! Fuck! What you say is beautiful!

¹⁶⁵ At All Saints Day, the 1st of November, it is still a widespread tradition among the French to solemnly celebrate the dead by lightening candles at the cemeteries.

However, when one's feeling fine one should believe it more than five minutes and stop the cynic attitude. And then, one day finally decide to feel ok. Luckily, lately I've discovered a comic talent. It just goes to show that depression leads to all kinds of things.

Yep, one can laugh about anything. It's better than to cry, no?
When the dead rest in peace then the rest remain alive. Huh...

One day I made an oath on the edge of the highest lake in the world. And since then, I know why I write. (Carbon 2008)

Chantal Carbon's text powerfully sets the scene of pain and self-pity – as well as auto-derision – in the slam milieu in this chapter, as well as at sessions where she performs it. From the start, the prose text has a high reality factor, as it alludes to a real suicide attempt with hydrochloric acid, well known in the milieu. Chantal performs silly but somewhat disturbing texts like this from time to time, among a wide selection of more lyrical and abstract texts. *Life's not easy...* seems to function in line with its intention, which I believe is to be an accurate presentation of her own state of mind as well as of central features of the slam milieu. In this chapter, I will look at how “poetry can be a light eating the shadow” (Souleymane Diamanka, introducing this chapter) for many psychologically and physically injured persons who have found their way to a slam session.

Outline of chapter

In the previous chapter, I let Dgiz remark that the February session at L'Atelier du Plateau that I presented was too *chaos* and *cowboy* to be brilliant. Only reluctantly did he explain what he meant: There had been too much *therapie*. He quickly added though that who was he to speak, as slam was therapy for him as well. For many practitioners, as I will show in this chapter, slam seems to straddle between quality and necessity, art and therapy. However, is it necessarily so that therapy and quality are opposites as Dgiz seems to imply? During this chapter, the distinction will appear less clear-cut, and in the next chapter, necessity will be directly connected to the meaning of art. I will now concentrate on the therapeutic effects slam has for many people. I start with an iconic

story of the cradle of Parisian slam, published on the Internet in August 2002 by one of the first practitioners, Nada. His story puts more flesh on the bones of the introductory quote – how poetry can “eat shadows” – but it essentially conveys the same meaning. In order to understand this transformative force of slam, I briefly introduce a theory of ritual by the anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (1997; 2005a; 2005b). He analyses ritual as a field of force capable of bringing about transformations in the “ontological ground of being” and the very life (situation) of the participants (2005b: 49). This is my first step in understanding the slam session as a ritual with a transformative force. The very mechanisms of bringing about the changes that participants in this chapter describe, will be the scope of Chapter 8, on emotions, words and *poiesis*.

After Nada’s account, I will present Johann Guyot-Baron’s story of the sources of slam. He traces, from an insider’s perspective, the (therapeutic) force of slam back to the speech therapy of Narcotics Anonymous. I deepen his analysis with Gregory Bateson’s (2000 [1972]) classic anthropological study of the epistemology of the Alcoholics Anonymous. Then we meet Dgiz again whose story is meant to show in detail what kind of existential turning point “the putting into words” can constitute. Together with Chantal Carbon, I also use Dgiz to exemplify the next step in the therapy of slam, the sharing taking place at the slam session. I liken the receptive attitude of the slam audience to the antiphonic “call and response” structure of mourning rituals in the Greek and Indian ethnographies of Nadia Seremetakis (1991) and Veena Das (1995a, 1995b, 1996).

La poésie, un art de première nécessité – Poetry, an art of bare necessity (Nada)

Nada is widely recognised as one of the first and most distinct Parisian slammers, with a life history and an artistic integrity that vouch for sincerity. Chantal Carbon – who discovered slam in 2001 through Nada, who performed and convened a session at the artist squat where she resided – said she almost did not believe her ears (*hallucine un peu*) the first time she heard him. She explains, with a little laughter:

He says stuff that you never say. He says nothing but that. At the same time, it’s also a construction of a character (*personnage*). Because he says all that;

and he hides all the rest. That means all his other personality; he doesn't talk about that.

Chantal's notion of the "construction of character" will be of importance throughout the thesis. I therefore emphasise here the full meaning of the term *personnage*.¹⁶⁶ It is foremost a "character" in the sense of a person of social importance or who stands out, but also of fiction or theatre. I think Chantal has both meanings in mind, as Nada carefully selects the traits for his character through writing and performance – but a performance, as we will see, that has so many affinities to real life that the performed character stands out also outside of the limelight.

I will let Nada present himself and the origins of Parisian slam in his own writing in a text that has been accessible on the Internet since 2002 and therefore has become a reference in the history of Parisian slam. I propose that this "construction of a character" through writing and subsequent performing within the specific riverbanks of the slam, share fundamental features of the dynamics of ritual as "simultaneously the construction and embodiment of a lived habitus" (Kapferer 2005b: 42). I suggest that in his text, Nada can be seen as finely constructing an embodied and emplaced character, just as Chantal acknowledged. After Nada's text, I briefly present Kapferer's perspective on ritual as a means of "reengaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being" (Kapferer 2005b: 49), an understanding I will return to at length in the next chapter.

Nada's account of the beginning of slam in Paris is here translated at length in order to pass on to the reader not only the specific process of therapy in slam, but also some of the mythic aura the text conveys.¹⁶⁷ Footnotes and square brackets are mine, round brackets belong to the original:

My name is Nada, in the forties, big, massive, ex-punk and drug addict, I'm one of the protagonists of the Slam Paris/banlieue circle [*mouvance*]. The

¹⁶⁶ Sources: French Wikitionary: *personnage*, www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/personnage and the French-English forum on www.wordreference.com (all accessed on 20.09.2011).

¹⁶⁷ Not only can the place of birth of Parisian slam be considered "mythic" – among prostitutes, transvestites and artists at Pigalle, Montmartre. Moreover, the secrecy surrounding the inspiration from the Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and the fundamental schism between the protagonists contribute to making the past of Parisian slam hazy. Nada mentions neither the NA, nor Pilote Le Hot's entrepreneurial role.

abuse of drugs, lasting more than a decade, has caused me personality problems and incurable neuroses, I have often this impression of being inhabited by several entities [...]. I consider poetry to be an art of bare/primordial necessity [*art de première nécessité*]¹⁶⁸. Its extension [*prolongement*] through orality is for me an urgency, an outlet for recurrent states of the soul [*états d'âmes*], a (never definitive) reply to an existential questioning, a means to surpass myself [*se dépasser*] during the performance, to have access to other possibilities/potentials [*possibles*] in going beyond what I think are my limits.

Slam started for me in 1995, at Club-Club, an ex prostitute bar [*bar à putes*] taken over by Tex and Nico (a homosexual couple), situated in Pigalle [...] The idea of Club-Club was to offer something different to the clientele every night and if possible to make them take part in the show. On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, DJs of different styles (salsa, rap, pop, soul, reggae) metamorphosed the handkerchief of a dance floor into gleaming sweat. Wednesdays the regulars came with their favourite CDs, each could play a choice of three titles. Tuesdays a poetry stage open to those who asked for it played out in this anachronistic place (the only bar in the street where there weren't bar hostesses [*entraîneuses*], opposite of a little hotel populated by small-scale dealers and transvestites). The atmosphere was frantic, the room packed, smoke-filled on the brink of unbreathable, the thirty-forty minutes long poetry sets were interrupted by fifteen minutes of musical pause, we were at this time a limited core and this gave us the opportunity to declaim, recite, read or chant [*scander*] several texts. Sound background¹⁶⁹ was allowed, the rappers frequenting Club-Club gratified us with inflammatory free-styles,¹⁷⁰ everybody coexisted with everybody, to the extent that I keep a memory of sometimes having experienced a feeling of

¹⁶⁸ The expression *première nécessité* in French is used in relation to "basic needs" or "bare necessities". (Source www.wordreference.com, accessed 20.09.2011). *Art de première nécessité* plays also on the concept of *art premier* – primitive or a first, basic, thus universal kind of art.

¹⁶⁹ He mentions this because in the milieu there is an on-going discussion about whether or not a slam session can contain musical accompaniment.

¹⁷⁰ The word "freestyle" was used during my fieldwork in 2007 in the sense of an improvisation around previously created rhymes or verses.

unity (*au point que j'en garde le souvenir d'avoir parfois ressenti une sensation d'unité*).

We were there, every Tuesday night, with fresh or refreshed rhymes, the fact of having a place to express myself every week pushed me to write new texts to not repeat myself. I had, without knowing it, my debut as a slammer. The stage fright petrified me; the sheet of paper caught in spasms by my trembling hand. The diction was clumsy and rapid, slipping a syllable every second or third line. I did not know one could breath with the stomach; I was too intimidated to manage to put/leave a silence between the words and evidently incapable of searching for them at the bottom of the abdomen [*au fond de l'abdomen*] to invest them [the words] with emotion and ten-folding their impact. Things have improved considerably since then, by mixing with rappers I have learnt what "flow" [...] is and I have devoted myself to find my own, I trained hundreds of hours, *a cappella*, with a musical backdrop, then I (yet without losing my original stage fright) gained self-confidence (*assurance*) in public. [...] (from Slam story: A brief outline of slam in France by Nada, my translation.¹⁷¹)

Nada's story has become emblematic in the process of establishing a cradle of Parisian slam as among whores and transvestites in the already mythic Pigalle¹⁷² of 19th century bohemians, as well as of Nada's own role within it. Much of Nada's poetry is about (young) drug addicts and prostitutes peopling the very environment of the street where

¹⁷¹ SlamStory: Un aperçu du Slam en France par NADA

http://www.webzinemaker.com/admi/m6/page.php3?num_web=1553&rubr=3&id=49274 (accessed 28.04.2011, when I rechecked 21.09.2011, the article was no longer available, neither on this site nor elsewhere on the Internet). The second half of the article treats competition in Parisian slam, French origins of the phenomenon – which Nada traces to significant names like Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé, besides "the famous 'Goguettes' where the working people came to proclaim their suffering and pain," (particularly numerous in Belleville (Steiner 2010: 8)). Additionally, the article addresses the development into shows, relationship to the suburbs, publications on slam (fanzines, photos and editions) and a long list of contact details of key participants and regular slam sessions. In relation to Nada's construction of character, it is interesting to note that he traces the origins of slam both to the finest French poetry tradition as well as the boisterous and illegal wine bars, thus a particular mix of the sublime with the profane that has played a significant role in French poetry since Baudelaire.

¹⁷² Other old-timers, like Paul Cash, situate the origins of slam to Belleville. The two neighbourhoods share many characteristics and continue to house the highest number of slam sessions in the city (the Belleville area probably more than Montmartre).

Club-Club was situated (or indeed rather more destitute fates, as Nada often writes about the dreariest of suburbs). There is therefore a close proximity between some of the central themes in Nada's poetry and his "myth of origin" of the Parisian slam scene.

Apart from being a formidable source of self-creation for Nada, the story can also be read as an evocative and trustworthy account of a typical slam session, and its surrounding environment. It gains trustworthiness, perhaps, foremost because people familiar with present day slam sessions can easily recognise the fundamental features it describes: The sense of necessity, the existential questioning, the urge as well as possibilities/potentials to surpass oneself, the stage fright and piece of paper in trembling hands, how to train and improve, and also the atmosphere of the small locale and the "memory of sometimes having experienced a feeling of unity". Through this trustworthiness, enhanced by Nada's sincere (or asseverative, see next chapter) signature, this myth of origin probably also functions as a charter for what Parisian slam ought to be and what people who go there can expect to be part of. In this chapter, I will focus on the individual therapeutic and practicing sides, and return to Nada's fundamental point on the experience of unity across differences in later chapters. When Nada talks about slam as a means for the soul to express itself, to come to "(non-definitive) existential answers", to surpass oneself during performance and, in reaching beyond one's own limits and to find other potentials. It reminds me strongly of ideas expressed by other, and younger slammers (see next chapter). Similarly, the creative urge to come up with new texts for the weekly sessions, how one slowly, due to intense practice tame the trembling paper between one's hands, the breathing, the techniques of recital and so one, are familiar remarks from my conversations and interviews. I therefore read this account as an excellent and authoritative source of what is at stake for the individual within slam. I will now move on to read it within a ritual framework.

The theory of the primordial constructive force of ritual that follows will be discussed at length in the next chapter. Here, it suffices to point to the relationship between, on the one hand, the structuring of the ritual and, on the other hand, the possibility for re-structuring the person's view and sense of self and surroundings, of bodily and mental dispositions and behaviour, of worldview and perhaps even world,

cosmology and cosmos. The structuring of ritual creates a dynamics, what Kapferer describes as virtuality or virtual, making it possible to enter

directly within the habitus and adjusting its parameters. The virtual of rite is a means of reengaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being. Indeed, I suggest engaging machinically within the habitus so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements [...] The aesthetics, repetitions, careful detailing, slowing of tempo, shifting position of participants, recontextualizations, etc., are major means for readjusting the processes within life that, among many other things, permit life as it is lived to regain its uninterrupted flow. (Kapferer 2005b: 49)

The intention of the rite is not to create illusions of real life, Kapferer explains in *The Feast of the Sorcerer*, but to “engender activities essential to the participation of the patient in actuality” (1997: 181). By turning to the notion of *habitus*, and particularly its performative aspects (*bodily hexis*) in the ritual action, Kapferer explains how new structure and “perceptual and cognitive processes, transitions and transformations are produced” (2005b: 41) which ‘the patient’ brings back to actuality – everyday life outside of the rite.

I stress a ritual space as a highly active space (a shifting field of force), a habitus that, as part of its vital dynamic, is orienting and reorienting the bodies of participants, directing them into meanings that they are frequently made to produce and enjoined to bring before their conscious awareness. In Bourdieu’s terms, the dynamics of many rites might be conceived of as being simultaneously the construction and embodiment of a lived habitus. (Kapferer 2005b: 42)

To perform in front of an audience, however benevolent the listeners might be, petrified Nada in the beginning. Through learning certain speech and breathing techniques, and with hundreds, perhaps thousands of hours of training – “practice the stage, practice the

stage, practice the stage”, as Damien and Antoine (Tô) put it – the stage persona and performance get ingrained in the body. Similarly, the cosmos Nada lived in was given new meanings through his poetic interpretations and the attentive listening of the others, within the particular riverbanks of the sharing of time and of words between – frequently – very different people, and situated within these particular surroundings.

To learn something bodily, to incorporate it, implies ”perceptual, physiological and behavioural change” Sarah Pink writes in *Doing Sensory Anthropology* as she quotes Greg Downey’s study of the learning of Brazilian capoeira (Downey 2007: 236 in Pink 2009: 37). Downey explores the process of ‘enskilment’ (a term borrowed from Ingold 2000) and points to how an “intellectual black box” often is placed between the input and output in anthropological studies of learning. The concept of habitus often functions in this encompassing manner – and it was indeed meant as a unifying concept by Bourdieu, I would add – as it seldom includes the practical process of formation (Downey 2007: 238). Of relevance in the context of slam is the relationship between what Kapferer calls the virtual reality created within the rite and actuality. To what extent the dispositions are “disposable” and “durable” as Bourdieu argues, depends on where in the organism the skill has taken hold, according to Downey:

Has it created a context-dependent behavioural change, affected a localized modification of the nervous system, or strengthened more general, centralized capacities, such as reflexive self-coaching? (Downey 2007: 237)

The question, following Downey, is to what extent the habitus created in slam can be at home in all echelons of stratified France. The answer can perhaps only be found empirically, and from what I have seen there is a certain crossover effect between the “virtual” and various realms of the “actual”.

So what is the content of these habituses that are created through the slam ritual? The self-confidence mentioned by Nada is related to several physical, mental and social levels. “Speak right into the microphone or right to the audience,” instructors, (*animateurs*), in this case Abd el Haq, at writing workshops tell the participants. “That way, they can hear what you’re saying and the air gets free passage from your lungs.”

There are not only practical reasons for raising one's head and straightening one's back. When someone encourages you and listen to what you say, most people's self-esteem would rise. This concerns another prominent aspect of bodily *hexis*. According to Bourdieu, bodily *hexis* is

a political mythology realized, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durably manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*. (Bourdieu 1977: 93-4, emphasis in original)

Bourdieu goes on to describe the bodily *hexes* of male and female in the “political mythology” of gender in Kabylia, where he claims the value system reappear “in gestures and movements of the body, in the form of the opposition between the straight and the bent, or between assurance and restraint” (1977: 94). Many of the “banlieue youth”, like Dgiz, bends or hunches down slightly in a way which is both part of a cool, however defensive (and perhaps even postcolonial subversive/subaltern, like the use of the hood), hip-hop way of moving your body. Moreover, it is as if – and this is prominent with someone as trialled and relatively old as Dgiz – curbed by the “political mythology” of the environment.¹⁷³ At *l'Atelier du Plateau* and other stages, Dgiz is utterly at home with or without his towering double bass, with or without other jazz, classical or rock musicians, and at home, he is in his workshops and in the streets of North East Paris. Similarly to when Dgiz performs “Dgizhors” (“Dgiz outside [prison]”) on stage, Nada's story shows how he has managed to leave the streets of hookers and addicts and entered a warm and convivial *inside* with people listening to him. Through repeated writing, practicing and performing, Nada has left his old self and the world of drug addiction increasingly behind, and instead constructed and embodied the poet and the slammer Nada.

By calling poetry an art of bare necessity, Nada is in line with Dgiz who comments about the workshops – often among destitute youth – that the slammers who

¹⁷³ In stark contrast, Souleymane Diamanka (whose story we will hear in Chapter 10) stands tall and proud as the Fulani poet he is brought up to be, even under the “concrete baobabs” in a deprived Bordelaise suburbs.

teach there “save lives” and *anime au plus profond*, “‘animate’ at the deepest level”.

Dgiz:

Roughly, there’s money for prisons, but not money for educators, not money for psychologists and psychiatrists, animators and associations in the rough neighbourhoods (*quartiers*). It’s a scandal! We – slammers, artists – who want to change things, have a lot of work: We save lives! It’s not calculated in the statistics. We animate at the deepest level. When we are on stage, it’s there we have our strength in expressing ourselves in front of the others. We know we do something good, on the ground. It’s useful. And this usefulness, we transfer it. But it’s not only utility.

In French, the verb *animer* and the noun *animateur* are used to describe the activity of the teachers in workshops (*ateliers*) as well as in slam sessions. The full French meaning of *animer* seems untranslatable into a single English word, as it has wider connotations than “to host”, but is far more commonly used than “to animate”. *Animer*¹⁷⁴ comes from the Latin *animare* meaning “giving life” and *anima*¹⁷⁵ meaning “current of air, breath, life, soul”. *Animer* means¹⁷⁶ to activate, motivate, prompt, inspire, bring life to (e.g. dinners, evenings, characters in theatre) and to chair, present, host and run debates, television news and workshops. The nouns *animateur*¹⁷⁷ (m) and *animatrice* (f) have equally wide usages ranging from (youth) leader, coordinator, presenter and host as well as the more abstract moving spirit and driving force. When Dgiz says that they *anime au plus profond* he undoubtedly goes beyond the everyday meaning of running a writing workshop (*animer un atelier d’écriture*) and points to the wider sense of the word as giving life in an essential way, as in Nada’s concept of poetry as the art of basic necessity.

¹⁷⁴ <http://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/animer> (accessed 19.05.2011)

¹⁷⁵ <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/anima> (accessed 19.05.2011)

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french-english/animer> (accessed 19.05.2011)

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french-english/animateur>

Narcotics anonymous and the slam phenomenon

Thérapie is engrained in Parisian slam poetry from its very beginning, as Nada's story of the bare necessity of poetry for him at Club-Club shows. Johann (Yo) traces the therapeutic source even one step further back. Before Club-Club, there was a group of Speech (*parole*) Anonymous¹⁷⁸, or more precise, Narcotics Anonymous, running in Pigalle "where I come from as well. All the founders of this movement come from there. [...] It's a bit bizarre, but it's the truth."¹⁷⁹ Johann, who describes himself in the tradition of dandyism from Oscar Wilde, where "your life is your artwork", constructs his character at every public opportunity. Even during the interviews we conducted, he invited along beautiful women to share a drink with him and watch the little performance he put up for the anthropologist. It is within this "life as continuous performance" perspective I interpret his readiness to name the other members in his NA group and tell me what was going on:

Narcotics Anonymous, it's a bit like *Fight Club*,¹⁸⁰ you can't say that you belong to Narcotics Anonymous: "The first rule is you do not talk about Narcotics Anonymous. The second rule is you *do not* talk about Narcotics Anonymous." It's an informal meeting where the people just give their first name. It's twelve stages to stop taking drugs. You get a sponsor¹⁸¹ (*parrain*), someone you can call when you get the desire. [...] Actually, you replace one dependency with another [...] with a religion. Because, even if Narcotics

¹⁷⁸ By the term "Speech Anonymous", I think Yo expressed what he saw as important in the two groups: the ability to express oneself to others about one's addictions and problems anonymously. Although I have not come across the expression "Speech Anonymous" (or *Parole Anonyme*) elsewhere, it might be a standard term.

¹⁷⁹ Yo names a handful of people well known in the present day slam scene. I interviewed two of the other four members Yo mentioned, but as I did not know them well and did not get along particularly with them, these interviews did not reach beyond their official self-presentation. We did not talk about the connection with the NA. The third participant, I met several times, but the circumstances (i.e. his mental stability) made me hesitate to interview him on my own. I also met the fourth member on a few occasions, but he was not in my closest circles.

¹⁸⁰ *Fight Club* is an American film from 1999. Yo only uses the allegory to quote the rules of anonymity surrounding both the club from the film where men meet to fight and the Narcotics Anonymous, but he might have other similarities in mind as well.

¹⁸¹ The role of the sponsor (*parrain*, godfather) of A/NA has many similarities with the role of *animateur* in workshops.

Anonymous forbids itself to be religious, it's very much religious because it makes us believe in god, or a superior power (*puissance*¹⁸² *supérieure*) – which is the very definition of the word Jahve, that part of it we can define¹⁸³[...] Well, it's linked not to a religion but to something religious, something theological. Agnostic, animist, but it's also this “Catho” side to it.

In fact, we meet up in an informal way. [...] The first stage is to accept your dependency, your illness. In the sixth-seventh, it is to do credit to the ones you've robbed. When you're addicted to drugs or alcohol, you've spiritually or materially robbed many people. There are twelve stages that you'll get through with your sponsor. [...] There are two or three meetings every day in Paris, totally anonymous, where you bump into the biggest international stars as well as the prostitutes of Porte de la Chapelle, really. It mixes everybody. And we get a limited time to talk (*temps de parole*), we've got 5-6 minutes to share (*partager*) our pain and suffering, our desire to take drugs, and we help each other (*et on s'aide, les uns et les autres*).

Yo starts his genealogy of Parisian slam with giving credit to Pilote Le Hot who “very quickly got the idea to invest in a stage where you could hear the speech.” In Yo's account, the occurrence of slam in Paris coincided with the rise of techno and DJs in the bars, and “a music so loud that you no longer could hear people speak”. According to him, “you could sense this urgency of speech”¹⁸⁴ at the time. I ask him about the relationship between Club-Club and the NA.

¹⁸² Bateson emphasises that the Alcoholics Anonymous's (AA) notion of Power is not thought of as unilateral and capable of reward and punish:

Their organization is strictly “democratic” (their word), and even their deity is still bound by what we might call a systemic determinism. The same limitation applies both to the relationship between the AA sponsor and the drunk whom he hopes to help and to the relationship between AA central office and every local group (Bateson 2000: 333-334, brackets in original)

¹⁸³ Yo, like many of the more wounded people in slam, quit school in his early teens. He has, however, read a lot and worked for several years in a local library. He associates himself with the “more intellectual” branch of the milieu, with Nada (who emphasises how fond he is of classical French poetry), and Felix Jousserand who, together with Abd el Haq have degrees from Sciences Po (Institute for Political Studies). Yo likes to show off equally much with his bookish wisdom as with his illicit dealer activities and sexual explicitness.

¹⁸⁴ The notion of urgency can be found in other accounts as well, for instance in the self-presentation by the oldest slam collective, 129H: “The collective 129H exists since September 2001, originates in the meeting

Well, it's this idea of the sharing of speech (*partage de parole*). [...] The poetry was often written by people who're not doing too well (*vont pas très bien*), who therefore speak a lot about their fractures, their wounds, the way the world hurts them, makes them suffer. And this you'll recognise if you come with me [to an NA meeting] [...] It's very touching/moving (*touchant*). People who start crying... A very, very, very intense emotional charge (*Une charge émotionnel très, très, très vive*). It's coming close to something poetic, a quite poetic way of living, with people who destroy themselves (*se détruisent*). You'd be struck by the similarity between a meeting in NA and a slam session... You'll see that there are many of the same characters/individuals (*personnages*). This idea of shared speech, in a free and anonymous way, without necessarily putting your ego in front.

Gregory Bateson (2000 [1972]) gives a quite similar description of AA in his classic study "The Cybernetics of "Self": A Theory of Alcoholism." According to Bateson, the practice of Alcoholics Anonymous works because it makes the dependents replace a false perception of self and personhood in the environment with a truer one (2000: 313-314). The first stage Yo mentioned, "to accept your dependency", Bateson likens to a "spiritual experience" where the myth of self-power is broken (Bateson 2000: 313). "The 'self' is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes" (2000: 331). The second step, which Yo speaks of indirectly as the founding basis of NA, is according to an AA pamphlet, that the members come "to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity".¹⁸⁵ The replacing of one false "epistemology"¹⁸⁶ with a truer one, seems very similar to what Kapferer describes as transformations of the "ontological ground of being" of the participants of ritual (2005b: 49). I therefore argue that it is not only the slam session and the NA meetings that share

between poets, rappers, slammers who were under pressure from an urgency to speak (*urgence de dire*)." (www.129h.com, accessed 24.05.2011).

¹⁸⁵ From an AA brochure. The two first stages in French: "1. Nous avons admis que nous étions impuissants devant l'alcool - que nous avons perdu la maîtrise de notre vie. 2. Nous en sommes venus à croire qu'une Puissance supérieure à nous-mêmes pouvait nous rendre la raison."

¹⁸⁶ In the article (2000), Bateson uses "epistemology" as a combination of ontology – what is a person and the world – and epistemology – how we know what sort of person and the world it is.

some fundamental characteristics, but the two can both be described as “rituals” in Kapferer’s sense.

Bateson suggests that the power can be felt as personal because, as it says in the slogan of the AA, “God [is] as you understand him to be”. From the perspective of cybernetics, which is Bateson’s main theoretical point in this article, this makes sense since “‘my’ relation to any larger system around me and including other things and persons will be different from ‘your’ relation” (2000: 332). To what extent the “god”, or *puissance*, in slam is felt as a personal force, I am not really sure, because the ethos of *vivre ensemble* and Rousseau’s social contract¹⁸⁷ seem so strong in France in general, and in the slam milieu in particular. I presume the relation must be felt and interpreted personally, but not as a kind of personal patron saint – as might be the interpretation in the AA brochure. Rather, I would suggest that it could be felt as the power of the community over the individual like in Durkheim’s notion of the basis of religious sentiments (Durkheim 1915). I believe this experience of a power – *puissance* – to be crucial for why slamming “works” for many practitioners, just as the Alcoholics Anonymous works for many alcoholics.

The “god” in Durkheim’s elementary forms of religious life is society itself, the dependency of the community the individual can feel, particularly in religious ceremonies and rituals. This feeling of a power greater than yourself will in the next chapter – “How slam animates at the deepest level with the help of emotions, words and *poiesis*” – relate to the self-organising, the autopoietic emergence of a force that a ritual curving away from society is capable of creating (Handelman 2004).

Bateson reaches what I see as crucial in the relationship between the person and the force when he discusses the role of anonymity. According to Yo, anonymity in slam is a question of “not putting your ego in front necessarily” (which can be a challenge for the many strong egos attracted as well as fuelled/fostered by the limelight of the stage). One of the founders of AA described anonymity as “the greatest symbol of self-sacrifice that we know”. Furthermore, Bateson quotes from the traditions of AA anonymity to be “the spiritual foundation of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before

¹⁸⁷ In Chapter 10, I will go more in detail on Rousseau’s concept of the social contract where people surrender their egoism as they gain freedom through realising that their individual will is identical to the general will of the sovereign people.

personalities” (2000: 334). In the slam scene, I sense that it is exactly a Durkheimian cult of society/community,¹⁸⁸ that constitutes the force compelling adherent slammers to try putting the principles before personalities, or rather perhaps to put community before ego.¹⁸⁹ Pilote and Tsunami describe this as not to put the *text* before the ego. Dgiz defines slam at one point as “a big, ultrasensitive family” which has been brought together by need (*besoin*) and desire (*envie*), and where people help each other because they need each other. I will look further into Dgiz’s understanding of the “slam family” after going through the story of how Dgiz converted from one life course to another with the help of (communities of) speech.

Dgizhors (Dgiz outside) – building the new Dgiz

Dgiz did not belong to the original NA group in Pigalle, but there is clearly a connection to “Speech Anonymous”, judging from the dates in the story of change I will come to shortly as well as from his strongly ethical perception of the ethos of the slam community, as will become clear towards the end of the chapter. I have heard Dgiz mention his alcoholism in public twice. Once, in an improvisation at a slam session he presented himself with an identifiable AA presentation: “My name is Karim. I’ve been abstinent since...”. Another time he posted this on his Facebook page:

Today, I’m ten years! The 5th of August 2000, I stopped drinking and started to write texts. First concert in April 2002... 10 years without a drop of alcohol, I wish perseverance, courage and abstinence to all those who suffer from addictions. It’s possible!

Within one day, 66 people had clicked the “I like”-button on Facebook and about 40 people had written supportive and congratulatory comments (Yo, performer as always,

¹⁸⁸ This is a force for the direction of community building as well as for the individual, but in this chapter, I try to keep the focus on the effects it has for the individual.

¹⁸⁹ I believe perhaps Yo conceptualises the issue of anonymity more accurately than Bateson, in the sense that it is not necessarily the personality that is toned down by only presenting yourself with a first name, but rather your social status. In slam, at least, the presentation with only your first name has no effect on the presentation of *personality*. Your *ego* on the other hand should be held in check, in the sense of not taking more time or place to which you are entitled.

wrote “Thank you Dgiz”, mimicking the personal “thank you” contributed by the listeners after the “confessions” at the meetings. Thus, Yo includes himself in the community of addicts.) The “social media” functioned here as a virtual supportive AA meeting.

Despite the fact that Dgiz readily declares in conversations that he is a dry alcoholic – and not a religious Muslim, as people often assume confronted with his absolute abstinence from alcohol –, he rarely slams or speaks publically about this part of his life. It is therefore not evident to me how his AA participation relates to the story about the changing-point in his life. Another question is why he tones down certain problematic and traumatic elements in his public construction of character.¹⁹⁰ I will return to the possible implications and meanings of this muting and “restriction” later in the chapter.

Dgiz inside – Generation Prison

Dgiz is fairly used to doing interviews with various media, and the image he draws in this part of the interview with me is well constructed and thought through. On the one side he still constructs the “Dgiz Outside” in an (therapeutically) efficient way, on the other side, he stays clear of stereotypical pitfalls (see Chapter 7). Now, the story of Dgizhors, in his own words:

I was in prison for a sentence where I was innocent¹⁹¹ [...] I was in crisis with myself because my world had collapsed (*s'est effondré*). Above the loss of freedom, to be locked up, I was also dad to a little boy, he was three years [...] The mother of my child had had enough of the guy who was inside, who did his round-trips to jail, and who wasn't there for his kid, and she decided to not visit me anymore. And I found myself in prison with a huge emotional

¹⁹⁰ The other important public silence concerned violence. One aspect of it – the violence that he had been part of in his childhood – he did not want to talk much about at all, the other – concerning present day issues – he *needed* to talk about in private conversations, but not publically. As he terms these details “confidential” in the interview, I consider it inappropriate to write too bluntly about these personal details.

¹⁹¹ When he claims his innocence, it relates to the particular sentence he talks about, not to the thirteen preceding years in crime and with recurrent imprisonments, all together four years. When he was going to play Job in *The Book of Job* for a theatre company, I asked him if he identified with Job and the random punishments the biblical character suffered, and he answered without hesitation: “Not at all!”

shock. My mates were louts/hoodlum (*voyous*) and I learnt that year that it [his life as a criminal] was all bullshit (*bidon*). That means, it was all hollow (*creux*), there was nothing inside. It wasn't true. I was taken instead of somebody else. It's my honour, as well, as it was an unworthy, shameful attack (*attaque indigne*). And yet, I didn't get any help. The associates who had robbed me of money didn't help me. I understood that to continue in crime (*banditisme* and *délinquance*) I had to be capable of doing something very bad to someone else. ["To get myself a gun and use it"]. Because it's a very vicious and villainous milieu (*milieu très vicieux très crapuleux*) [...] I asked myself the question, and no, I'm not capable, I'm not like that. And I grieved (*fais la deuil*) over crime and mates. This rupture, it was hard for me; I didn't eat, I was all alone.

It was very, very hard. I was about to die, really, physically, mentally, in the heart, everywhere. I had surreal phases, translucid even, when time had lost its meaning. With long periods of silence.

I got help from a psychologist, one hour every fortnight, or sometimes every week. He saw that I was about to die. [...] And to identify my emotions, and also to tell them apart/separate them (*diviser*), I started writing. I was in school just until 5th grade [12 years], so I write the way I speak. I wrote, and it was also the psychologist who worked with me and brought out sides of my identity seen through childhood memories. All the passages, the moments, listening to rap, doing sports, being with family, which are finally ordinary moments, but for me they were good moments because the rest was scheming, dealing, stress, police, tension in the youth home, huge family problems, huge affective/emotional problems and, with a few lights in my life: Like school, sports, music, and mates, the life of any adolescent. And through that, I wrote and I reconstructed myself/pieced myself together (*je me suis recomposé*). Like a child, a teenager, except that I was 27 years old.

Dgiz also improvised and performed his newly written texts over music from the radio in the prison cell. Except from that, he tells little of his life in prison. The account is more the essence and analysis of what happened than the details of it. It is a period that he has put behind him. I ask him if it was the psychologist who suggested this kind of reconstruction of personhood through childhood memories.

[...] The psychologist did his work, to return me to whom I am, his work to know whom I am. And afterwards, I did my work, to approach something solid. To say no, I'm not a sheep. I'm innocent. I'm free. I'm a man. I know why I'm here. I know what's brought me here.

I get the impression that the metaphors Dgiz uses to talk about the process can be understood as quite concretely felt. He pieced his life and self together again in a new combination, like a puzzle where a new picture appeared. In order to do so, the hollowness underneath the cracked surface of his former life had to be replaced with solid ground. Dgiz creates a contrast between, on the one hand, being a man with freedom and an understanding of the circumstances of his life and, on the other, being "a sheep." What is this sheep?

Well. I just said that it's always the same [people] (*les mêmes*) who go to prison. In France, we have beautiful prisons run by the semi-private, that's nothing but a bubble economy. I find that a scandal, unacceptable. It's a whole economy around detention. And if you look closely, it's always the same who go there, the recidivists, the drug traffickers, the crooks and rascals (*bandits*), the ill [mentally as well as drug addicts, and both]. Instead of paying, [...] for prevention, see earlier quote on "animating at the deepest level"] they pay screws [prison wardens], guards, cops and gendarmes, to catch them and watch over them. For me, it's the rearing of sheep. You put the sheep to the side, and from time to time, you sacrifice one. [...] No, we are humans! We are men!

Dgiz sees “religious sects”, as he calls them, who try to recruit youth to radical Islamic groups, and traffickers who recruit youth to sell drugs, as basically belonging to the same logic: To take advantage of others through turning them into sheep, creatures without control of their own life.¹⁹²

Go to the suburbs and give out some hash to sell. Yes, you’re American gangsters, you’ll have huge cars. That’s the start of the rearing of the sheep. Then you bring them to the sheepfold. First, he’ll get six months, he’ll be filled with hatred, and life is ruined. It’s a sheep. It’s cattle. [...] That’s what’s happening in our beautiful Republic today [...] thousands of years of accumulated sentences. It’s unbelievable. It’s people who ought to have had a chance like everybody else. Since thirty years back, and there’s still no public discourse concerning these people. And it continues. That’s why communication is so important! [...] If you enclose someone in a neighbourhood (*quartier*) with inaccessible dreams, it’s quite natural that he’ll be frustrated and angry. And when he wants to cultivate himself a little, he realises that they con (*roule*) him and take him for an idiot (*con*), a sheep. And he breaks (*casse*) everything.

That’s why it is so important to create bridges, to communicate: “That rage, you can put it in a text, on a paper. If you break things, over there it’s the sheepfold, the prison. Come on, I can show you how you can do it. Prévert, he’s a great poet, he says it like this. Look! Get some inspiration! Look at that idiot in that big car; he’s a *mytho* (“liar”). Express that! You can use metaphors. Language is beautiful, it rings (*elle sonne*). You’ve got talent! You’re born here [in France], be proud! Rap! Slam! Shout! Do something! I’ve met youth who’d never made a rhyme and now they’re artists. That’s my gold record! [...] The pen and the paper are massive weapons of description; with them, you can rage war!

¹⁹² Dgiz did not speak much about radical Islam in the suburbs, but according to him, there are sects who teach youth in the suburbs that France today is France Vichy and Pétain (the French quisling during the Vichy government), and “then they [the media, put simply] put it on the telly to show what people are like in the suburbs...”.

In a second interview, Dgiz spells out clearly that the rearing of the sheep and what he in a song calls “Generation prison” often relates to the “immigrant population”.¹⁹³ The reason why he did not mention this aspect earlier is perhaps that it is self-evident in France today. In addition, the division of the population into “immigrants” and various “immigrant populations” is, in his opinion, only suitable for talking about in metaphors, as he does in the song “Super‘guez”.

Behind the quite stupid superhero Super‘guez, I really talk about the rearing of the sheep and the immigrant people in France, often. I say it in the text, in the name of their special dishes. Instead of citing the countries, the origins. [...] I do it artistically. “The Gypsies, Arabs, Portuguese” [he shouts a little, like a political or religious demagogue, then calms completely]: No! Sorry! I’m not interested in talking like that. I find that too... [hesitating] personal. And pretentious. I’m not a president.¹⁹⁴

At the same time, Dgiz claims that “in every immigrant family in France there is one drug addict.”

It’s necessary to talk about it and it concerns everybody, but the inspiration comes from [personal experience]. The rearing of the sheep and the construction of prisons. Before, it was sheep, now it’s the merguez that goes to the supermarket with whatever is left. Your parents came to work and produce things. You, you’re what’s left. If you want work, it’s that and

¹⁹³ Despite what he terms the rearing of sheep of predominantly immigrant origin, he refuses to agree with me when I ask him if it is racism that underpins the discriminatory practices. To him, France is “la terre d’accueil”, the land of welcoming (this will be discussed further in the final chapter). Like in my fieldwork among second generation British Asians in London, I found an overwhelming tendency to defend the basic values and attitudes of their fellow countrymen in front of the foreign anthropologist.

¹⁹⁴ Superguez is named after the North African mutton- or beef sausage Merguez. Dgiz is aware that the metaphor “sheep” gets an added meaning if it is put in opposition to “pig”. He is quick to stress because as he says, the mate of Superguez is MC Chorizo, so it won’t be “sheep against pork, Muslim against Christian”. Common expressions about the sheep that stupidly follows, is probably the main inspiration behind Dgiz’s expression, however the fact that much of the “generation prison” and the rearing of the sheep concerns people of Muslim origin probably adds to the efficacy of the metaphor.

that branch, and no other. If you want to be a singer or sportsperson, it's the same. There aren't any alternatives. There's no access to freely available *savoir-vivre*.

Dgiz is here completely in line with Bourdieu's (1994) analysis of French society in *Distinction*, where he shows how the availability or lack of availability to cultural goods – or a more general *savoir-vivre*, as Dgiz asks for – are important mechanisms in acquiring certain dispositions. Back to Dgiz, who points to what the “sheep” have access to instead of cultural education and *savoir-vivre*:

At the same time, we construct prisons in order to say: “oh, there are too many! [prisoners]” which will be financed by the prisoners themselves.

All these youth who go to prison because they've been caught with 50 grams of hashish. The kid will find himself with all these real criminals. He'll be frustrated in his life and feel victimised. He'll learn option hatred and rage against the system where he has lost in advance. [...] Back in his suburb, he'll play the idiot until he's caught again. It's sheep, and it's a whole generation. All these “older brothers” (*grands frères*) who were in prison, in drugs, because they've seen Montana in Scarface¹⁹⁵ on the telly: “I'll fuck the world!” They fell into drugs, and the answer became repression and prisons, which created a lot of delinquency and crime. In all the foreign families, it's at least one brother – or sister – who're into drugs. It's a scandal! And I've never heard them [politicians and the like, I suppose] talk about it. I've never heard statistics that says how many youth of immigrant families who're dead of AIDS, of drugs, of overdoses. How many years of accumulated prison [sentences] distributed?

¹⁹⁵ An American gangster film from 1983 by Brian De Palma where Al Pacino plays Tony Montana, an immigrant in Miami who gets rich from selling and trafficking cocaine. English Wikipedia points to the influence the film has had on certain kinds of rap (gangsta) and particularly Black and Hispanic youth (Wikipedia: Scarface, and <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1859898,00.html> (both accessed 23.05.2011).

The rearing of sheep also has a history, connecting it even closer and more generally to postcolonial immigration.

My grandparents came to France, and my father also. I feel like that, like a sheep. A herd, come here, the pasture is over there. [...] – It's a failure of society, except that society doesn't recognise it. And society has taken fear and criticises the religious. In fact, France needed labour to be reconstructed after the war. And they haven't even treated this labour, the retired, well. Haven't even recognised, during forty, fifty years, the soldiers in the wars. And above all, haven't managed to occupy itself with the children, the generation that came afterwards. The second, the third generation. That's generation prison. It's all these youth who're French, who speak French well, who're here, and who feel that they're not at home. And now they are treated as invaders, who've come here with their religion. It's whatever. Well, the French aren't hospitable [...] Why they don't feel at home? Because there's visible, palpable inequality, for work, for schools. It isn't even the same schools in the neighbourhoods (*quartiers*), not the same teachers, not the same shops, not the same life. Not the same buses. And they feel it. [...] When a youth smokes hash in a housing estate that smells shit, and doesn't go to school, it's a serious problem. But it's not in a prison that we'll deal with that. It's with an educator, a psychiatrist, psychologist, a mediator, a mediator from the neighbourhood who gets along well, a musician [...] On the ground, that's what I feel. I react humanely. It's youth who want to get away.

Like he managed to get away, through music and slam sessions outside the suburbs. For Dgiz, the therapy has consisted of turning himself from being a manipulated sheep to becoming a human, a man. Like in Bateson's case of the replacement of epistemologies in Alcoholics Anonymous, Dgiz has replaced a false perception of self and world and its relations with – presumably – a truer one. Part of this transformation consisted of changing a perception of what kind of world that was accessible for him. I now move on

to how he step by step widened his horizon from the banlieue all the way to the slam sessions at Parisian cafés.

From Dgizhors to Dgiz intra muros – from the banlieues to Paris

Dgiz first started to train himself for free at the local centre for “new music” (*musique acutelle*), Tamanoir, in the suburban commune of Gennevilliers¹⁹⁶ in exchange for holding workshops for local youth.

I understood that to use this place [Tamanoir], I had to create something with them, I couldn't just come there and say “Hi!” They'd [The municipality, I suppose] employed people who weren't from the neighbourhood, and it was a bit tense. In addition, they'd programmed reggae and French chansons, but not rap [which probably all the local youth were into]. Something had to be done. I put myself in danger, as well. I took the role as “older brother”, I wrote and I animated workshops, and for that, I was allowed to train there. That was great luck because it was there I met the director of the Conservatory [of Gennevilliers] who presented me to musicians, who again presented me to other musicians, and to Paris. And I started to go to Paris and didn't stay in the suburbs anymore. There, I met slammers etc., and now I earn my living thanks to that. [...] After three years of holding workshops in exchange for being able to train and record there, they started to pay me. Then, I started animating workshops in neighbouring communes, Clichy[-sous-Bois], Neuilly-la-Garenne, and later on, from time to time in colleges, in theatres... at the [music festival] Zebrock with 4000 youth in three weeks.

Dgiz emphasises again the importance of communicating and how that has created multiple and multiplying relations. Moreover, the relations widened his horizons also in a literal sense. The travelling “assured” him:

¹⁹⁶ Tamanoir is situated in the neighbourhood where Dgiz spent his youth, which Wikipedia says used to be one of the “most sensitive estates in France” (*cités les plus sensibles*). Dgiz calls it an area where the police did not go at the time.

It's possible to live elsewhere: One isn't adapted to one particular neighbourhood. No, one doesn't belong to a neighbourhood. One is free and equal, sisters and brothers. One must move around, meet others. And it's possible to circulate.

He now circulates more or less regularly to countries in Europe, North and West Africa, Brazil and other places where *Alliance Française* and similar, state-run institutions put up concerts and workshops with Francophone artists. The fact that I came from afar to understand French society through slam he found to be an incredible and wonderful idea, and he often mentioned how he would like to bring along his two sons on some of his travels, to widen their horizon as well.

Dgiz discovered slam at a session at the local library in Gennevilliers, and it was the director at the conservatory whom he had met at Tamanoir, the music centre, who invited him along to a session in Paris.

I fell in love immediately: A mic that circulates, and an amazing verbal feat. For me until then, it was only rappers who could express themselves like that. But there, no... It hit me hard.

Dgiz sums up the turning point he experienced like this:

It was a grief. I was aware that what I had done was not good, the trafficking and all. And the emptiness, that everything was false. [...] It's difficult to be alone with one's own ideas like that. It's important to share them. I wasn't proud of what I had done. It's the same for everybody. That's why slam is interesting. It "de-compartmentalises", it opens up (*décloisonne, ça ouvre*).

The therapeutic space of slam: slam as sharing of suffering

I now return to the milieu Johann (Yo) described as full of injured persons (*accidentés, pas des lignes droites*) where people share their suffering. I ask Dgiz what he means by calling slam a “big ultrasensitive family”:

That’s what brought us to this poetry. Every life has got its episodes, the strong moments to transmit. It’s a need for this rage, to talk. And there’s a need to capture these spaces of freedom to express oneself (*besoin de s’accaparer des espaces de liberté pour s’exprimer*). This desire to express oneself, all these people need that. We are sensitive, we react to things, and transmit them. To learn and transmit, you must exceed and you must be sensitive. And someone who expresses him or herself in slam, should be understood by the others. If one doesn’t understand, isn’t sensitive, isn’t reactive, one doesn’t belong there (*on n’a rien à faire là*). [...] In the beginning, the slam was almost only the mentally ill [...] with some problems in their head, [...] from dependency – irrelevant if it’s from alcohol or drugs –, mental illnesses. Most of the slammers came from that. Now, there are many [(kinds of) slammers], but they have a minimum of sensitivity. The majority is ultrasensitive, towards the poetry of the words, the emotions. That’s why we’re a big family. We respect each other, because we understand. We know who cheats, who wants what [...], so we react to that as well. We take care like in a community [for better or worse]. But at the same time, it’s beautiful. It’s magical, fairylike. It’s like the old tales from England, with the fairies, kings and Merlin the sorcerer. There’s a slightly mystic side to it: All the poets in nature who’re there to give the word, the real words, to balance the speech and words (*équilibrer les mots*) that touch everybody, that everybody understands, with emotions. [...] That’s why we support each other.

With this perspective, “audience” is too passive a term for the regulars who come, listen, and participate at a slam session. Kapferer suggests the term “ritual gathering” (2005b: 42) to describe an active audience. In French, the word for attending a slam session is *assister à*, which means “to attend”, “be at” and “be part of”. I will now illustrate this point of support from the “ultrasensitive family” with the ethically abridged story of Natacha.

(Tata Milouda and) Natacha

Natacha’s story carries some slight resemblance to the Cinderella story of Tata Milouda,¹⁹⁷ a middle-aged undocumented immigrant who fled from a violent and suppressive husband in Morocco, and being helped by the slammer Grand Corps Malade, found fame by telling her life story, first at the slam scene, then in her own show. Natacha, in her thirties, also found a new life – “regained herself” – with the help of the slam ethos of encouraging others to share their creative writing. She too now creates her own shows. She had been attending slam sessions in her neighbourhood for several years without participating when Murder¹⁹⁸ came over to her and said: “I’m sure you too have got something to say. Come, put your name on the list together with me.” Natacha:

I always sat in a corner and didn’t speak to many; I just wanted to listen. And the fact that he came over to me and caught that I had something to say, was really with heart and in the spirit of sharing. [...] It’s true that I wrote, texts that I didn’t read for anybody. I was really, really introvert (*fermée sur moi-même*). And the fact that he came over, without knowing me, and that it wasn’t in vain...

Slam has given me new contacts, and given me my words back (*redonner la parole*), to take (*reprendre*) speech back. It has given me back, or reminded (*rappelle*) me of my identity – the people who surrounded me

¹⁹⁷ Tata Milouda came to slam after my fieldwork finished. The way her story is conveyed in the media, the narrative points directly to founding principles of the French Republican emancipation project: Tata Milouda chose freedom over suppression in fleeing her violent and dominating husband and six children. Through having faith in herself, learning French and expressing herself, she found both love and independence in France.

¹⁹⁸ Murder is a Central African refugee. He calls Parisian slam “Scar Academy”, which is a pun on the television show “Star Academy” that conveys all the mental and physical wounds in the slam milieu.

tried to suffocate (*étouffer*) my identity – and reminded me: You’re a poet, you’re a painter. Remember your life, your words, colours, sentiments... It was significant (*révélateur*). Because I was in a phase of being erased, of fading away. And then, to go up on stages, talk to people, in front of people who react because of what I write, what I say, what I improvise. In front of people with shining eyes, who’re moved, with goose bumps, who hug and kiss me. It’s revealing love, positivity. And leave the four walls of the house, where I feel oppressed, suffocated, where I don’t feel secure. It’s a journey each time, to wait for new texts, new encounters, new reactions from the public. A person who’d seen me once said: “She’s strong this pitching ball woman [the name of the first slam text she performed], she’s a good girl. If you know her, hug her hard from me!” The little winks like that, things with people that’s enriching and very strengthening. It’s a strong product!

I suggest it was Natacha’s identity as a full human being that was in the process of “fading”, of being “suffocated” and “erased”. In her words, I hear a story of what it means to be acknowledged: of being seen, of being listened to and being taken seriously, and of being respected and responded to by human reactions and words.

“Trafficking in stigmas”, and dignity

Slam consists for a large part of “traumatised” (Chantal Carbon’s expression) or “injured” (Yo’s expression) people. In many cases, the traumas and injuries take gendered forms. Chantal Carbon mentioned that in the women-only association *Slamôfeminin* “a majority of girls had had problems with rape or incest, - directly and seriously or less directly. Not necessarily physically, but who had been confronted with that kind of problems.” She could have added anorexia, domestic violence and other troubles related – to a large extent – to the female body. In some of the interviews I carried out, we quickly entered territories that the women consciously chose not to slam about directly – only *indirectly* –, which I cannot address. They could mention these issues in face-to-face conversations – even to a person they did not know very well – but these stories had to be considerably changed to become part of a public (re-)construction

of self and character taking place at the slam sessions, or elsewhere in public. Methodologically, it is a shortfall that these stories cannot be told, particularly since women's stories already have a smaller place in the thesis. However, empirically, the fact that the persons consider their reconstructed public character as better off without the inclusion of the bluntness of certain traumas, hints in significant ways to central features of the public reconstitution and healing process.

Despite my proposal that it is particularly the female gendered traumas that are restrained or rewritten for public view, I choose to explain also this part of the healing process by using Dgiz as an example. I know his story the best, and I am well familiar with certain restrictions in his reconstruction. It is also my argument, that although the quietness is more widespread around specifically female sufferings, the problematic itself is not gendered, as it points to the construction of *humanness* and human dignity not female or male identities. What is at stake here, I think, are several intertwined issues, all pointing to the distinction between “sheep”, on the one hand, and “honest”, “sincere”, “human” and “artist”, on the other hand.

Concerning the “restrictions” in Dgiz’ (public) reconstruction, he turns to individual, personal relations where he more than openly talks about what troubles him, all the time emphasising that to be open and talk about things calmly and with dignity – instead of becoming angry and thus somehow demeaning himself in words and action – is essential. Every day there are incidents where the former Dgiz would choose one solution – be it with psychological or physical violence and brutishness – and the “Dgiz outside” (Dgizhors) must think twice through the recent and hard acquired *savoir-vivre* – (lacking in his past) – to find a solution dignified for a man, a dad, a friend, a boyfriend, an artist. To behave appropriately, to do the right things also in situations of distress, is one important ingredient in Dgiz’s reconstruction. It is a question of acquiring *savoir-vivre* – perhaps the hallmark of humanity – in life.

What to talk about publically, and how to talk about it, is also part of this *savoir-vivre*. Dgiz is extremely aware of how characters – or more precisely, subject positions – are created through powerful discourses (see the theoretical introduction in Chapter 4 on stereotypes and the “token Arab”). One explanation for the restriction and downplaying might be found here: Dgiz knows how his story conforms to the stereotypical story of the

stereotypical *jeune de banlieue*. Moreover, if the *jeune de banlieue* is not a “threat” in perpetrating all the *insécurité* (as claimed by the right-wing law and order discourse), he still might very well be a “sheep”, a less than human. Dgiz once said the French rapper Abdel Malik was “trafficking in stigmas” because he, in addition to being black, had converted to Islam and talked about prison and drug dealing in the housing estates in the suburbs. “We, who’ve been there, don’t even talk about these things,” Dgiz commented. What does it mean to be “trafficking in stigmas”?

I suggest that to talk about gangs, violence (perpetrated as well as subjugated), prison, but also alcoholism, incest, anorexia and so on, too bluntly constitutes “trafficking in stigmas”. These “stigmas” victimise, belittle, maybe also to some extent ask for compassion – as different from recognition or acknowledgement, which imply equality – in a manner contrary to the “human” Dgiz and other slammers demand to be acknowledged as. Probably Dgiz’s healing period has been full of unequal relationships where he was the victim and/or the humiliated recipient, and he has now passed into a phase where it has become important to create equal relations (which it seems to me some still deny him, see Chapter 4).

Dgiz seems to consider his alcoholism and connections to violence as undignified, (as he sometimes acts out a drunkard in a humiliating and ridiculing way, and violence is in the arts and alternative circles he now moves considered brutish and degrading). It seems, therefore, that both sexes exclude from their public character, issues in their history that would victimise them. In reversing humiliation, denial of dignity and degradation of the fully human, they construct selves and characters that emit strength and demand respect and equal treatment. Perhaps it is right to say that in this radical and avant-garde milieu in a large European city today, both sexes want to install their public persona with dignity (not shame and honour). I suggest it is within this perspective that the restrictions in Dgiz’s and others’ public construction of self and character must be understood.

Texts and therapy

Before I, as a conclusion, provide a broader, comparative analysis of “the big, ultrasensitive family” of slam, I let Chantal Carbon analyse the particular therapeutic

space of slam that hit her with the same force at about the same time as Dgiz entered the Parisian scene. Chantal Carbon – painter, musician and writer, besides being a prominent old-timer, among other things in the women-only collective Slamôfemin¹⁹⁹ – describes her texts as of two radically different kinds: “Poetic, as you say, sad, tormented and beautiful, and the other genre that has nothing in common, and is *trash*, foolish, for instance in a text called ‘I feel excluded’”. The text that introduces this chapter is in this latter genre as well. It captures a state of mind widespread and recognised as so, in the slam milieu, and Chantal’s black, but pertinent humour creates more laughter than perhaps any other Parisian slammer I can think of. These texts are originating in

Personal reflections that sometimes last for years – hassles, worries, things (*des prises de tête, machins*) and everything. And finally, there’s a sort of maturation of the subject. You’ve done the tour, so to say, and you’ve become aware of a lot of things. That might also happen in the form of a text. Usually, it results in a completely foolish text, a bit funny (*marrant*), provocative, and also auto-derisive. I’m a person that bothers about things (*prends la tête*). I’ve passed quite a while bothering. And afterwards, when I’ve finished my tour of bothering, off I go and make the text. Everybody has a good laugh because they know they’ve got the same hassles as well. This kind of text I might write when I’ve somewhat gotten over it (*dépassé*). When I’m still in it, I haven’t enough distance to write about it. And it won’t be fun either, because I’m still in it, and that’s not fun.

It’s true that there was a certain emotion between the people who told personal things and the people who listened and who felt touched. But what’s important is that we were above the differences between people. The more personal things you say, the more people feel concerned.²⁰⁰ Because

¹⁹⁹ Slamôfeminin is the result of an invitation by Christina Lopez at Café Culturel to women in the slam milieu to create a show for the Woman’s Day and the annual French poetry festival *Printemps de Poètes* in 2003. They decided to continue the collaboration to promote and support the presence of women in slam, but they do not collectively or publically put forward explicitly feminist or even female perspectives. Source: <http://slamofeminin.free.fr/site/index2.html> (accessed 20.05.2011)

²⁰⁰ The Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård makes a very similar point in an interview on Norwegian television (accessible here: <http://www.nrk.no/nett-tv/klipp/557443/>, at circa 5 minutes (accessed

finally, the more personal it is, the more general it becomes, and the more you can touch someone. If on the contrary you try to make a generalisation in order to defend a cause, nobody bothers because you've nothing to base it on (*appuies sur rien*). It's an abstraction. If you base it on your experience, on your own sentiment, the more you use your own personal experience, the more the others will be touched by it, because they will feel it, because they know it's true.²⁰¹ [She speaks fast, with dedication].

And I think it was also that which excited me the most in the beginning. People said things that weren't possible to say, that you can't say, that you never talk about with anybody. And there they come, in front of loads of people and "blah!" I was really impressed! That's not bad! To be able to do that, to have a possibility to get over something personal, in transforming it [she speaks really slowly, pondering her words] – already for yourself and then for people – it becomes public, it's spoken about, it's real, it's recognised, it's accepted, it's integrated in reality. Sometimes people say this, but it's true; it is really a form of therapy. Slam has really got a therapeutic side to it.

But that's also a bit worrying, because people aren't necessarily over it. Sometimes they're still completely within it. So, it might project whatever, all and nothing: The good, the bad, the overcome (*dépassé*), the not

18.01.2011)) when he explains why he goes in such detail when recounting his forty something years long life over more than two thousand pages in a six-volume long novel:

something about going so deeply into yourself, some of the things I discover is that what is experienced as myself, on that deep level, relates to everybody. Ekelöf says something like "the bottom of yourself is the bottom of others". And there is something very true in that, and that thought pleases me very much. I try to go further and further in, and that's the way it is with the world, with the atom. The further in you go, the more general it becomes. Finally, everything becomes the same, in one way or another. [Everything consists of electrons, protons, neutrons and the like...] (my transcription and translation).

²⁰¹ Natacha also comments on this notion of truth when she speaks of the reception of her text "Punching ball woman": "It's physically strong and it marked well the kick-off [of her career within slam]. It's a taboo, delicate subject. But not with delicacy. I'm saying the truth. That's why I love slam. Slam slams (*claque*). I think that in this world, everything is in appearances only, in superficiality. A lot of things are hidden, disguised, distorted. But if one says the truth, one can hope for a change. If one is always about to lie, camouflage, hide, like in politics – that's my old chestnut (*sujet bateau*) – why there's so many problems in the country. Politics is all the opposite of that."

overcome. It's to throw things into the air, a bit. And that's the game; it's the process that is like that. And that's what interested me in the beginning. It's a personal level and a social level. That means by that very mechanism, socially as well, they recreate relations between people who've no rapport (*se recréent des liens entre les gens qui n'ont pas de rapport*) and they heal (*guérissent*) social things that couldn't be healed otherwise. Because it's not by staying alone in their flat in front of the telly that it will circulate from one person to the next who never meet. And it was all that that made me go "Wow!" in the beginning – in addition to the artistic aspect – such a human basis of things (*le fond aussi humain de truc*). That it's personal and social as well. It's really a complete whole (*ensemble complet*).

Chantal summarises fundamental aspects of slam as individual therapy, how slam can do the things it does, and the community and social aspects of slamming (treated in this thesis respectively in Chapter 7 on therapy, 8 on ritual and *poiesis* and 9 and 10 on social relations). The quote shows in my opinion elegantly how the three levels are connected: The individual, therapeutic effect of slamming your mental headaches is depending on the empathy and receptiveness of the listeners ready to acknowledge your dignity and full humanness. This rapport depends again on the ability of the slammers to make their words somehow recognisable and understandable for other, however different, human beings. Your personal troubles become recognised and acknowledged when you give them reality with your words, and this acknowledgement is part of the therapy. The whole circle has its origin, for Chantal and Dgiz among many others, when the words of others hit them hard for the first time, creating totally unexpected openings between with people whom you might think you have nothing in common. This is where the therapy of slam starts.

Witnessing suffering in the receptiveness of antiphony

In the text “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain”, the anthropologist Veena Das²⁰² (1996) analyses at the process of reconciling oneself with suffering and pain through the use of language.

In the genre of lamentation [...] grief is articulated through the body, for instance, by infliction of grievous hurt on oneself, “objectifying” and making present the inner state, and finally given a home in language. Thus the transaction between body and language leads to an articulation of the world in which the strangeness of the world revealed by death, by its non-inhabitability, can be transformed into a world in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of a life that has to be lived in loss. (Das 1996: 69)

A slam poetry session is not a mourning ritual after death. Nevertheless, as I have shown in this chapter, many of its practitioners have suffered mental as well as physical pain, and the speech and bodily practice of slam in front of a collective of slammers and listeners is a way for them to make the world habitable again. Dgiz’ pain in prison quickly turned bodily (and probably it already was physical, in terms of alcoholism) when the carpet of existence was torn away under his feet and he felt he was going to die, physically, mentally and “in the heart.” The reconstruction of new personhoods within a reconstructed world – “in which one can dwell again, in full awareness of [...] loss” – echoes the transformation of the “ontological ground of being” (Kapferer 2005b: 49) within the active audience of a ritual gathering. The dynamic force of ritual will be further explored in the next chapter.

Many anthropologists have described the importance of “witnessing” in various rituals. Veena Das (1996: 78) refers to C. Nadia Seremataki’s “ethics of antiphony” in mourning ritual practices in Peloponnesus. Antiphony means “voices” (φωνή) that are reciprocal, responding, face-to-face, or “in place of” (ἀντί) (Seremataki 1991: 102), and just like witnessing, it can also take on a juridical character: “For yourself and then for

²⁰² Thanks to Rune Flikke for pointing out these articles by Veena Das to me.

people – it becomes public, it’s spoken about, it’s real, it’s recognised, it’s accepted, it’s integrated in reality,” as Chantal said. Das develops the notion of antiphony to argue how the interplay of speech and acknowledgement makes life liveable and the world inhabitable again for a person in pain or mourning. When loss is put into words, it is made utterable, socially apprehendable and public (Das 1996: 79). The listening role of others is important in this process. To hear, according to Serematakis (1991:104), is to carry value to the discourse of the mourner or as I claim, to bestow it with human dignity. The emotion in the antiphonic response validates, or acknowledges, the truth-value, or the true or full humanness, of the other’s pain. According to Serematakis, the

Linguistic, acoustic, and corporeal interaction between the [“soloist in pain”) and the [“chorus”) is considered crucial to the performance of the [“soloist”). Lament singers cannot attain the proper emotional intensity and reality outside of the antiphonic structure and thus outside of the ceremony itself. Women may recite the narrative of a lament but are unable to sing it “with proper pain”. (Serematakis 1991: 100)

There are obviously many differences between a mourning ritual and a slam session; nevertheless, they share many fundamental features. A slam can only take place within the particular structure of open access to the stage – where “linguistic, acoustic and corporeal interaction” can take place – a limited and shared time of speech, and a receptive attitude of the listeners. To “assist” at a slam session means – in the words of Dgiz – that you must be understanding, sensitive and reactive, or that you in some sense take part in the creation of a “chorus” in an antiphonic structure.

The truth claims that arise from the ritual, then, depend on the emotional force of pain and the jural force of antiphonic confirmation. By stating that they cannot properly sing laments without the help of others, Maniat women reveal that pain, in order to be rendered valid, has to be socially constructed in antiphonic relations. Antiphony is a jural and historicizing structure. (Serematakis 1991: 120)

Through language – words and emotions – the slammers share of themselves, and through listening and acknowledging the reality of what is being said. The listeners historicise, inscribe into history, the reconstruction of person and world that is taking place from the stage. From this perspective, the emphasis of letting the slammers speak for themselves without interpretive and evaluative introductions from the presenter as well as the lack of comments during and after a performance – in contrast to the dynamics of slam poetry in the USA, as I will show in Chapter 9 – make sense. To recognise the reality of the experience of the other, one has to give him or her the freedom to speak for him or herself, and one has to acknowledge the performance by applauding. Slam poetry is therefore more akin to a mourning ritual than to a deliberative public sphere, in the Habermasian sense: No conclusions, no compromises, no consensus are reached.

Chapter 8 - *Les mots sont des vêtements de l'émotion*²⁰³

How slam animate at the deepest level with the help of emotions, words and *poiesis*

Introduction: Slam – the sharing of moving moments

Dgiz voluntarily adds a little anecdote from a workshop in a school at the end of one of our interviews. The story, I believe, expresses much of what Dgiz sees as both the ethos as well as essence of slam:

Sometimes slam can be very moving. A little “slammeuse” in a class of children comes to mind. Her father was alcoholic, and she had written a slam for him to stop drinking, [which she performed] in front of her mates, with tears in her eyes. That was beautiful, and at the same time, it was painful: It was fantastic! For me, it’s good because at such moments, it’s not the teacher who intervenes and says that your friend has problems, that you must respect her. It’s all the classmates who realise it themselves and are made sensitive to it. And, it’s a sharing (*partage*). It’ll give strength to the community of the class, to this little group. And for her, it will give her strength for having confronted her problems. It’s not sorted for her, but already two or three grown-ups know, and she has managed to express herself, and protect herself. It’s great! And then we follow on [with another presentation/performance] (*Et puis, on s’enchaîne*). And me too, I want to cry at such moments, and I say to myself that I make a difference (*là je sers à quelque chose*). It’s important to continue that.

²⁰³ “Words are the clothes of the emotions”, the opening phrase of the poem *Les poètes se chachent pour écrire*, “The poets hide to write”, by Souleymane Diamanka. The poem will be presented later in this chapter.

To Dgiz, slam is *un moment, un instant* – “a moment, an instance” – created by the “the encounter” (*rencontre*) between people who write and express themselves and who listen to others – be it between experienced artists or between youth in a workshop in the *banlieues* (or, which most often is the case in slam sessions, a good mix of the two.) In this chapter, I move on from the individual therapy of Chapter 7 to explore what occurs in these instances of encounter.

Problematics refined: Slam – the fullest possible relation

Much of the explanation of the force of slam can be found in Dgiz’s own story: The girl managed to express herself in a manner – with words and tearful eyes – that conveyed her pain and effort to the listening class, to the extent that also Dgiz was moved. Her performance resonated with the listeners and made them realise the truth about her situation as well as made them sensitive to it. Like Chantal said in the previous chapter:

To have a possibility to get over something personal, in transforming it – already for yourself and then for people – it becomes public, it’s spoken about, it’s real, it’s recognised, it’s accepted, it’s integrated in reality.

To share this experience and moment of understanding, was – I think – what strengthened the community of the class. Moreover, of course, to be the creative force behind such a moment – of *poiesis* bringing forth, or unconcealing *aletheia* (truth) (Heidegger 1971) – gave strength to the girl. In addition, all this took place in the brief instance between two other – very different, most likely – slam appearances.

“Slam is a place or ground, not a style,” Damien and Antoine (Tô), the lyrical virtuosi from Chapter 6, emphasise in my interview with them. Damien continues:

And on that ground (*terrain*), you’ll find certain common denominators in form, ensuring that the ground for relations between you and the audience

will be the fullest possible (*le plus pleinement possible*). For me, the common denominators concern the rhythmicity. There's a certain rhythmicity or musicality that brings about a particular energy. And also the fact that you mainly talk about everyday people with everyday concerns in an everyday language. Concerning your performance, you ask yourself certain questions about the relationship with the audience and the energy necessary to release it (*dégager*) [the relationship]. And then, it's a question of art.

Antoine adds: "And the depth of your evocation (*le profondeur de ton évocation*)".²⁰⁴ When Damien says that slam is a *terrain* he seems to think in the abstract sense as much as the physical. Like "ground" or "field", *terrain* is derived from the word for physical earth. It has, however, also taken on more abstract meanings as a field or ground where a specific activity takes place, a ground thus under constant reproduction by the very activity. According to the two, the activity of slam taking place on the ground is a creation of relations. In order for this creation to succeed, Damien and Tôt emphasize the technicalities of performance. Our conversation turned out to be an exploration of what constitutes the ground of slam and what kinds of craftsmanship and evocation are needed to create it.

In the first part, I will go through two related theories of the self-organising, autopoietic force of ritual, which can enlighten the dynamics in the "fullest possible relation" of the "ground" of slam. In the second, I explore the multisensory experiences of this ground. Eventually, Damien and Antoine's native theory of aesthetics is the scope of the third part of the chapter where I look at the possible questions they as artists ask themselves in order to successfully create a relation with their audience, as they say. In the coda to the chapter, "The sound of poetry", I investigate into the *techné* of their art in detail.

Aesthesis as the extension of the senses

The simultaneous perception from the senses and from the intellect, as well as cognition

²⁰⁴ Damien repeats what Antoine added and finishes by specifying that slam can also be exactly the opposite of what he has just said, "As it's not a style but a ground. But in order to capture most ears on that ground you must ask yourself such questions."

or discernment in ethical matters, are all tied together in the Greek noun *αἴσθησις* (aesthesia, from *αἰσθάνομαι* *aisthanomai*, “I perceive, feel, sense”), from which the notion of aesthetics²⁰⁵ is derived. The concept of aesthetics – as expressions as well as experience – can therefore help one explore the capacity of slam to create relations between performer and listener. The girl’s expressions in Dgiz’s anecdote created an emotional, sensational and intellectual insight as well as an ethical realisation or experience in her classmates.

Aesthetic expressions can be seen as attempts to purposefully extend the human senses through manipulating with sensual experience, the anthropologists John Leavitt and Lynn M. Hart (1990: 83-4) point out. By asking towards what this extension of the senses strives, one gets indication of what it is in a society that is conceived of as above or beyond the senses and therefore only reachable by a sensuous extension. Judging by his story, for Dgiz, the girl’s expressions extended, in an intertwined effort, towards the strengthening of the individual person expressing and protecting herself, and the strengthening of the community. However, together with, or as part of, the individual and collective strengthening, her expressions also extended towards beauty: the beauty of sharing, of understanding and of the strength of the person and the community. This claim also gives further weight to my suggestion in the previous chapter that it is important to construct characters that are strong and dignified, not humiliated or hateful victims or “sheep”. My claim that the aesthesis of slam strives towards full humans and a community based on equality will be investigated from various perspectives in this and the following two chapters.

In this chapter, I will look at how oral poetry or performance artists work on their aesthetic expressions in order to reach above the visible, audible and tangible. Beyond and above the senses they find “beauty”, “truth”, “moments of humanity” and “a fullness in relations between the very being of persons”, beyond “sheepfold” and “trite” categorisations and descriptions.

²⁰⁵ The concept also entails the object or expression that is perceived, as well as the discernment or the ability to perceive and the senses themselves. (Sources: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/αἴσθησις> (accessed 15.04.2011); Ingerslev 1866; Leavitt and Hart 1990: 83; Feagin 1999).

Outline of the chapter

To set the scene for the chapter, I have chosen Dgiz's story on how the simple structure of a workshop and subsequent session in a classroom can, (with the help of a "ritual expert" like himself), *anime au plus profond* – "animate at the deepest level". After this introduction, I follow on with a theoretical perspective that explores ritual as an activity aiming at "reengaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being" (Kapferer 2005b: 49). I thus claim that slam sessions share an essential dynamics with rituals, and which ritual theory can grasp: How can the dynamic force experienced in the flow of practice in the slam session qua ritual reconstruct characters?

In the second part of the chapter, I will expand on Dgiz's perspective on the animating capacities of slam with a quite different, but equally quintessential inside perspective on this fundamental dynamic: Several of Souleymane Diamanka's poems speak to the heart of what performed poetry is about.²⁰⁶ "The poets hide to write" (*Les poètes se cachent pour écrire*) depicts the struggle of the poet at the time of writing, while *Moment d'Humanité* communicates how the artist creates exactly a shared "moment (of humanity)". I see the overall subject of this chapter as finely delineated in these two poems: How are these shared moments created and what do they do to us? Souleymane connects in his poems two fundamental ingredients that lead to the very "moment of encounter": The relationship between speech and emotions on the one hand, and the craftsmanship (*techné*) and the creation/bringing forth/reconcealing (*poiesis*) of poetry on the other hand. I see the two foci – emotions-speech, and *techné-poiesis* – as intertwined but analytically separable aspects of the central dynamics and the creation of meaning in the individual performances in a slam session. After Souleymane's poems, I *first* discuss the speech-emotion connection, before I, in part three, concentrate on the *techné* and *poiesis*.

Part one: Slam – ritual in its own right

Dgiz conceptualises slam as an ephemeral moment rising from encounters within the particular practice and structure – the riverbanks – of the slam session. In his perspective

²⁰⁶ They have a "poetological" or even "slamological" theme as they provide a meta-commentary on the work of the poet and the function of poetry/slam (Janss and Refsum 2003: 30-36).

– perhaps slightly shaped by the ethos of the Alcoholic Anonymous, as I discussed in the previous chapter – one can expect and demand a particular sensibility on behalf of the listeners, which draws them together more in direction of a ritual gathering than an audience to a show. The heterogeneity and the artistic eloquence in combination create the particular touching and transformative magic of slam for Dgiz. In “Why ritual in its own right? How so?” the anthropologist Don Handelman takes seriously the widespread native claim that ritual has a transformative capacity. He, like Kapferer, aims at moving away from the predominant focus in anthropological literature on ritual as representation²⁰⁷ and instead explores how this transformative capacity (on community and participants) may come about (2004: 15). Handelman points out that all encounters between persons interacting in even the most mundane everyday way have a propensity of self-organisation (2004: 13). This ephemeral *autopoietic* – self-making – structure feeds back into the interaction and influences it, thus producing an outcome which is something more, or different from, the individual components of the starting-point. When interaction, encounters or rituals “curve” or “fold” inwards, towards themselves and away from the surrounding flow of everyday life, they form independent realities with transformative potentials.²⁰⁸ The more they fold or curve within themselves, the larger the potential for autonomous and possibly transformative self-creation or self-production.

In Chapter 1, I used Victor Turner’s image of the river and its banks to illustrate the relationship between “flow” and the parameters of slam sessions. With the added perspective of Handelman’s autopoietic curvature, I suggest the image of the river that can swirl into the geological formation of a “Giant’s kettle” or “cauldron”. A Giant’s kettle is a cavity formed in the rock by currents of water that is lead into its own circular path where the swirling debris the current carries carves a depression into the rock. The metaphor is useful in the context of slam, as the harder the pebbles in the debris the more efficient the carving of a swirling flow: The more powerful the slam, the stronger the autopoietic force to shape independent forms and experiences...

²⁰⁷ Neither Kapferer nor Handelman deny that ritual has important representational and reflective features, however, like Kapferer claims, the emphasis on representation has taken attention away from the inner dynamics of ritual (2005b: 40). Handelman has also a further point on why it is important to look beyond the representational emphasis, which I will come to shortly.

²⁰⁸ The emergent structures Handelman describes seem similar to “the experience of subjective and intersubjective flow” in Turner’s understanding of ritual (1982: 80) and perhaps also to what Dgiz calls “ephemeral moments” (*moments éphémères*) resulting from particular encounters (*rencontres*).

In one of Handelman's examples, the tempo of rhythm that organises dancers into an independent little world: "The aesthetic recurrence of rhythmicity and its movement generate their own time/space" (Handelman 2004: 20). The "time/space" of slam – or *terrain* (ground, field) as Damien and Tô say – is on the overall level generated by the regular and repetitive movement back and forth in the room creating a rhythm of its own, (which at certain nights has given me the sensuous impression that the whole place is in movement). Within this rhythm, a wide variety of rhythmicities plays out. Rhythmicity is a multisensory experience, through the ears, but it is also visual and kinaesthetical (cf. Turner 1982: 81).

The materiality of sound and how it can be felt in the body is one of several means by which layers of meaning can be added to a poem at poetry readings, as the poet and professor in English Peter Middleton²⁰⁹ (2010 [1999]) shows. He claims that all live arts where the performer uses the body in performance produce a form of amplification where the audience "delegates its corporeality to the stage" (William Fitzgerald quoted in Middleton 2010: 240). Middleton likens listening to a poem to watching a dancer:

Alongside this conscious activity of semiotic interpretation is another kinaesthetic response, equally cognitive, but not linguistic, in which the audience senses the movements of the dancers in terms of their own bodies [...] as an action they might be making. The watcher dances with the dancer in an imaginative empathy [...] There is no necessary intervening stage of conscious interpretation between seeing the dancer and this inward imaginative movement [...] Similarly, a sound heard as the voice of another also produces virtual responses throughout the bodies of the audience. When the speaker utters the poem, the listeners also speak it in virtuality. (Middleton 2010: 240-41)

²⁰⁹ Middleton discusses poetry *readings*, which in many ways are different to a slam session. All his points I make use of in this chapter are however relevant for slam, perhaps *to an even larger degree* than the reading of poetry by one or a few poets at a reading, for reasons that will become clear in my discussion. Briefly, it is a question of even more "messy" and heterogeneous sets, and more blurring of boundaries between artist and audience, with stronger bodily performative element – thus more incentive for "corporeal identification" – and with stronger "everyday disturbances".

Listening, watching and kinaesthetically sensing a poem can convey and produce meaning in a multisensory way. A shared experience (if not necessarily of shared meaning) is created through the formally structured and rhythmically produced ground – time/space – of slam, as it curves inwards towards its own self-organising.

The doing of transformation through ritual requires curvature, the opening of space/time within which cause and effect can be joined self-referentially, such that each embeds knowledge of its relation to the other, thereby together influencing one another recursively in predicative, controlled ways. Cause and effect find one another through self-referentiality. (Handelman 2004: 15)

In slam, I claim – simplistically – that the “cause” can be seen as equal treatment and the “effect” is full humanness for all, in a “utopian democracy”: Ideally, all act like full humans with freedom, respecting the freedom of others.

Animateurs at sessions and workshops consciously attempt at creating convivial atmosphere for freedom of speech with equal conditions for all. This ethos is passed on as newly established slammers quickly take on the responsibility to hold workshops and host sessions. “Ritual expertise” disseminates thus quickly, further emphasising the democratic and egalitarian character. Likewise, I believe this ethos can be experienced existentially: People *feel* that they – for the most part – are treated equally, that they can have their say and that the atmosphere is one of solidarity and support.²¹⁰ The equality is further emphasised by the physical arrangements of the room, where – as I described in Chapter 6 – the “stage” is often not much more than a clearing among the audience, the animateur tries to keep a low profile and one after the other of the “audience” step into the limelight to take the role of performer.

Handelman also suggests that within the space/time of self-organisation of highly complex rituals, all tenses can coexist, as the curve creates shortcuts between past and future (2004: 14, n13 p29). I understand this aspect of the folding structure to provide an opportunity for participants to reimagine or reformulate both past and future within ritual

²¹⁰ When this is *not* the case, practitioners seem to remember it. Marie-Françoise told me disappointedly about a session where her performance was put off until very late in the evening.

space/time. Take Dgiz as an example as he performs his *Dgizhors* – “Dgiz outside (prison)” – with his double bass opening (his own) slam session in the high cultured *Atelier du Plateau*. Thus, reiterating his own past as he lays the ground for his future life, still “outside”. Other examples include Nada, who is also “inside” of the community of the slammers still talking about what is going on outside. Natacha enacts, and consequently becomes, a strong woman it is worth listening to. Whereas Chantal Carbon emphasises that she must have put her mental headaches (*prise de tête*) behind her (*depassé*) before she writes and performs a text about it, if not, it can “project whatever” and is “not fun”. She and the others thus go through their “hassles” again, but from the “predicative, controlled” (Handelman 2004: 15) perspective of one who has “overcome” them.

Within Hadelman’s perspective, slam is transformative because it is capable of curving away from society, forming its distinct reality where – in the case of Parisian slam – equality, freedom, and solidarity and respect, are acted out and experienced, often in the sense of human dignity or full humanness. Handelman quotes Bateson to say that the recursiveness of the phenomenon is a prerequisite for its survival over time (Bateson 1977 in Handelman 2004: 14). This can explain why some slammers are concerned by the changes that the success of Grand Corps Malade has brought about: “When it starts for everybody, it’s perhaps finished for us who started it,” Yo commented on the slam phenomenon. Similarly, Chantal points to the fundamental break that the possibility of becoming famous has created in the – self-referential – world of slam and that has changed its attraction considerably, from having foremost an “autopoietic” appeal to that of external benefits. Chantal:

Before, the question did not arise, while now it does: Now, people know that they might become famous, earn a lot of money or perhaps have their photo on the poster. So, in the personal reasoning of people, that has totally changed, and they don’t come for the same reasons anymore. Now they don’t necessarily come because they have something to say.

For Yo and Chantal, slam has lost some of its curvature, its self-referentiality and, thus,

much of its marvel. One of the changes, according to Chantal, was that now people are less daring to experiment with fresh, new texts without having rehearsed them into flawless performances.

The autopoiesis of the curving phenomenon is similar to the specific conditions created during liminality – a state carefully set apart from ordinary life – in Victor Turner’s (1967) analysis of *rites de passage*, and where the ritual experts seemed to control in detail the transformation into new statuses. It is also similar to what Bruce Kapferer terms “virtuality”: A descent into the constitutive dynamics of reality construction (2005a, 2005b).²¹¹ The actual techniques to control transformative forces in ritual are not investigated in Handelman’s article. This is, however, central to Kapferer’s analysis of the constitutive force of ritual (1997, 2005a, 2005b, Hobart and Kapferer 2005).

Phantasmogoria, techne and poiesis in virtuality

In *The Feast of the Sorcerer*, Kapferer describes “the density of virtuality” of a great Singhalese anti-sorcery rite, the Suniyama, “to be a radical slowing down and entry within the constructional moments which human beings realize themselves and their worlds” (Kapferer 1997: 180). “Realise” I understand here in its fullest sense: Human beings do not only become aware of and understand circumstances they live under, the ritual also makes it possible to fulfil a potential found – perhaps as a germ – within humans as well as within their world. I understand potential as possibilities beyond the everyday structures or circumstances, or like from Nada’s story in the previous chapter: “to have access to other possibilities/potentials [*possibles*] in going beyond what I think are my limits.” With the concept of virtuality, Kapferer wants to emphasise ritual as “a dynamic for the production of meaning”, not mere representation (Kapferer 2005b: 50), similar to the *autopoiesis* in Handelman’s argument. If slam can be seen as a ritual, the

²¹¹ The concept of virtuality is put together by the symbolic theory of Susanne Langer and what Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 118 in Kapferer 1997: 180) term the primordial slowing down of “scientific” practice. What Deleuze and Guattari calls “science” – or what I here, after Kapferer, call ritual dynamics – provides a means to actualise and thus limit the infinite possibilities (in chaos – which I read to be primordial chaos or the infinite speed and difference of the possible and the virtual (in Kapferer’s version (1997: 180) it is the “chaos of the circumstances of life, a world that is always in flux”) through functions. A function slows down the infinite speed (of chaos) (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 118)

perspective of virtuality suggests thus that the slam session is a field of force creating a reality of its own, rather than (just) a representation of wider society. The girl in Dgiz's anecdote *produced* strength (from) within herself as well as within the relations of the class; she did not just depict what was already there. In this within this field of force the genesis of the therapeutic effect can be found.

Kapferer suggests that the reality constructed in the virtuality of the Suniyana ritual is complete in itself and a magnification, not a model *of* (neither *for*), processes in everyday life (1997: 180). The magnification effect can be explained by the simplification and condensation achieved by symbolic forms (Hobart and Kapferer 2005: 10, n 3 p52; Turner 1967) and the specific structuring of the unfolding event.

Much of the dynamics of rite [...] is a property of its specific events within the rite (their aesthetic properties, the orientation of participants and the dynamic of their interrelation, the form and content of acts) and to the dynamics of their relation to each other. [...] It is in the performance structuration of ritual that transformational possibilities of the dynamics of rite perceptually and cognitively can occur. (Kapferer 2005b: 41)

What is the “performance structuration” – the “events”, “their aesthetic properties”, “orientation of participants” and “their interrelation” and “form and content of acts” – in slam? And what are its “perceptual” and “cognitive” “transformational possibilities”?

In many ways, slam constitutes a diametrical contrast to the extremely elaborate characters and stage sets of the Singhalese rituals Kapferer describes. In slam, costumes and props are forbidden (seemingly by an unwritten ethos everyone complies with), and the surroundings are accommodated to a very little degree (see Chapter 6). Middleton makes an interesting point out of comparing the “messy, incomplete, heterogeneous poetry reading” with the “well-regulated art of opera [...] where everyone sits in specially designed seats in a specially designed auditorium [...] and the performers are separated physically from the audience” (2010: 222). In slam sessions, no program provides information about players and plot and the surroundings are not vacated for disturbances, and most importantly, the session takes place in only minimally

transformed everyday surroundings of cafés, theatres, galleries and school gyms. And, Middleton writes,

this transformation of the backdrop tells the participants that the everyday world, despite the way it is crowded with other activities and purposes, can still provide a space for poetry. Poetry becomes sonic performance in the face of considerable odds, a conquest of the resistant contingency of everyday life which provides a ground bass or insistent inescapable rhythm. Meanings arise out of the noise of the lifeworld, both as sign and other materially intelligible forms of order and significance. (Middleton 2010: 222)

Middleton's point is akin to that of Kapferer (1984) when the latter claims that the shallow involvement (play) and deep play for the participants in a ritual gathering coexist in order to produce reflexivity for onlookers and transformation of identity for the patient. Middleton however is rather making a claim about how these "flaws" in the performance make participants think of the everyday *world* – "actuality" outside the fold – rather than reflect about *themselves*.

These flaws are really all part of the act, important constitutive elements of the performance event. The myriad distractions which mitigate against the ideal become players representing the resistant conditions of the contemporary culture in the drama of poetry's tentative appearance and overcoming of inertia and opposition. (Middleton 2010: 222)

The everydayness of the surroundings and the surroundings' intrusion into the performance as sounds, smells and sight encourage the people present "to reflect upon the conditions under which" the poetry and performance come into being, is Middleton's point (2010:222). I think the surroundings also might be read as a stage set in itself, brought fully into the fold of the session: "The stage is all the world, and the players are mere men and women", meaning that the everyday world, where any everyday person can – and does – turn up, is the very stage. Just like Damien defines slam in the beginning

of this chapter: “You mainly talk about everyday people with everyday concerns in an everyday language.” Similarly, the everyday faces and dressing of the slammers emphasise that they play the role of themselves in more or less their everyday lives. (And the everydayness of it all might help participants to retrieve the experience in virtuality back to actuality.) However, importantly, it is a role they play and it is played out in the limelight. As Chantal Carbon pointed out in the previous chapter: They construct a character – within the freedom of the virtual. The lesser the accessories and amplification, the more the bareness of the human face, the human body, the human voice, the everyday aspects of its surroundings, and the meaning of the words come to the forefront.²¹²

The imagery of the Suriyana creates the full cosmology of the Singhalese Theravada Buddhism, with its realms of demons on the bottom and the heavens of Buddha on top. The cosmology of slam on the other hand, seems all “this-worldly” or immanent, with this-worldly participants, this-worldly inspiration and this-worldly values. Even the power, or *puissance* experienced as a strengthening of both individual and community, is immanent and this-worldly as I claimed in the previous chapter where I interpreted it as a “force of the community”, in the sense described by Durkheim. I will return to the freedom, responsibility and individual originality (Taylor 1985) that this immanence and this-worldliness might lead to in the creational and transformative process shortly.

The virtual in Kapferer’s analysis of rites is “a fully lived existential reality”, however slowed down and filtered (2005b: 47). It is dynamically played out in the same processual way that sensory perception is organised: The lived, enduring existential reality of the session is both the ground where it is played out and “the force behind the meaningful constructions that are woven into the dynamics” (2005b: 47). The egalitarian, humanising and convivial reality of slam is built into the physical arrangement of the room and seating of participants. It is also usually present in the general atmosphere and invoked by the way the presenter structures the evening and encourages the listeners to welcome the slammers. The characteristics of this reality are thus dynamically played

²¹² I have not found any further explanation for these ascetic rules in slam poetry, other than that the poetry itself should take centre stage. In my (anthropological) argument, it is not only poetry but also people – the person behind the performer – that come into focus.

out, but this lived reality also becomes the *force* of the meaningful constructions that are brought forth in the performances. The force creates the “utopian democracy” of equality, full human beings, and conviviality.

The ritual space is something more than and different from actuality in a fundamental respect, as it folds inwards into its self-organising Giant’s kettle. It is freed from the constraints and determinations of the stream of everyday life (Kapferer 2005b: 47), freeing the human imagination for the participants to imagine themselves and their life differently (2005b: 47). This potential for blurring of the real and the imaginary in this self-organising swirl, Kapferer calls the *phantasmagoric*²¹³ character of the field of force of virtuality. It is a “dynamic that allows for all kinds of potentialities of human experience to take shape and form” (Kapferer 2005b: 47). In the previous chapter, I tried to show some of the potentialities coming to the fore in the stories of Nada, Dgiz and Natacha.

This (almost open-ended, it seems) potentiality is also related to where the *techne* of the ritual can transport the participants. One part of the *techne*, craftsmanship, of ritual is the precise and repetitive practices – in slam I think of the writing of the list of participants, the allotted slot, the attention and applause and avoidance of interruptions and comments. Kapferer describes *techne* as

a method for entering into life’s vital processes and adjusting dynamics. By entering within the particular dynamics of life by means of the virtuality of ritual, ritualists engage with positioning and structuring processes that are otherwise impossible to address in the tempo and dynamics of ordinary lived processes as these are lived at the surface. (Kapferer 2005b: 48)

The craftsmanship of the ritual can create a “virtual” reality which seems to consist of a far larger repertoire of possibilities than “actual” reality.

²¹³ Phantasmagoric: from Ancient Greek φάντασμα (phantasma, “ghost”) + ἀγορεύειν (agoreuein, “to speak publicly”): Characterized by or pertaining to a dream-like blurring of real and imaginary elements. From Wiktionary: phantasmagoric

The structural and repetitive craftsmanship of *techné* is only one part of its function,²¹⁴ according to Kapferer. It is also connected to the constitutive and generative capacity to create, “bring forth” - *poiesis*: “practice not as a representation of meanings but the very dynamic of their constitution” (Kapferer 1997: 178), or, as Heidegger (1971) defined it, their “unconcealment”. It is not only the representation of equality, freedom, respect and solidarity but also (an attempt at) the very *constitution* and *practice* of a “utopian democracy” – or a poietic unconcealment of the dynamics of the highly symbolic “Tennis court oath”, according to Johann (Yo) with equal and free *citoyens*. This also concerns the poetic and poietic unconcealing of the human underneath layers of “trite” descriptions and categorisations, as Souleymane’s poetry soon will suggest. Or, more spiritually, as Antoine will explain in the last part of this chapter: the advancement (through the speech and practice) towards a free thought, a free life. The craftsmanship and poiesis bring forth or create (unconceal) the selves, characters and relations or bonds that the artists and audience utter and practice.

Part two: Communication and emotions – the multisensory poiesis or wizardry of slam

From words as clothes for feelings to moments of humanity

In two short poems at his album *L’Hiver Peul* (“Fulani Winter”), the renowned slammer Souleymane Diamanka²¹⁵ describes the craftsmanship as well as creative work of the poet. I will first go through the two overtly “slamological” poems, before I suggest how

²¹⁴ In *The Feast of the Sorcerer*, Kapferer connects *techné* with *poiesis* in accordance with Heidegger: “*techné* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techné* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something *poietic*” (Heidegger cited in Kapferer 1997: 325 n56).

²¹⁵ Since Souleymane Diamanka was not present – and rarely is – at the session at L’Atelier du Plateau presented in detail in Chapter 6, I will give a brief description of his way of performing here (a fuller presentation of him will come in Chapter 10). Souleymane’s stage persona is different from the other “complete performers” we meet in this chapter: His pose is upright and still, outright immobile – perhaps slightly shy and awkward – and his voice monotonous, but deep and sonorous. Like Dgiz, Damien and Antoine (Tô), he always knows his poems by heart and never fumbles. Unlike other good slammers, however, his charisma and *presence* seems to emanate not from Dgiz’s “theory of completeness” saying that a slammer should be fairly good at all aspects of performance rather than excel only in one, but from a proud dignity and the sheer beauty of his poetry, voice and figure. Souleymane is not only a rugged *jeune de banlieue* in caps, hoodie and streetwise hip-hop attire. He is also a former model for the classical French luxury brand Hermès. Moreover, he is a “Fulani child” descending from a family of West African griots and always starts his recitals with his paternal genealogy.

his “meta-commentaries” on slam correspond with my outline of slam as a transformative ritual. The first poem, “Moment of humanity”, treats how the poet goes from intra-subjective emotions to inter-subjective sharing. The second, “The poets hide to write” states that “the words are clothes for the emotions”, and it is hard work for the poet “to adorn their phrases well”. This sentence, which I have chosen as the title of this chapter, not only says that humans handle their emotions through words. The French original *les mots sont des vêtements de l’émotion*, full as it is of lyrical labour – of rich rhymes and assonances²¹⁶ – *audibly* inform the listener that there exist poetic techniques of sound and rhythm to convey layers of meaning. I understand “The poets hide to write” as describing a part of the whole process – namely writing – within the encompassing poetic work in “Moment of humanity”. I therefore start with the latter. Souleymane’s poetry is exceptionally lyrical, but unfortunately my translation renders not much more than the literal sense.

Moment of humanity^v (by Souleymane Diamanka)

I’m nothing but a poor artist in the service of beauty
 Merchant of sentiments and moments of humanity
 [...]
 And I’ve found my voice in this writing
 when I’ve put my sobs and pure cries on paper
 I thank the Muses for all they do
 But to shine on the surface you sometimes have to hit the bottom
 That’s what the poet says, in spite of himself
 [...]
 I push with all my force the doors of emotion
 Voyage at the depths of souls where the thoughts and words are
 The *griot*²¹⁷ and his texts, it’s the architect and his mansions

²¹⁶ Assonance is internal rhymes created by vowel sounds, here the [o] and [ɔ̃]: [mo] /mots/ [sɔ̃] /sont/ and [emosjɔ̃] /emotion/

²¹⁷ A griot is a West African poet and storyteller with similar functions to the European bards and Scandinavian skalds.

And when the walls of imagination rise
 even misery has its harvest/wealth
 This piece is just a moment of humanity
 I'm nothing but a poor artist in the service of beauty
 [...]

who waits for inspiration for the poem to be gentle like the caress the skin loves
 (*le poème soit doux comme les caresses que la peau aime*)²¹⁸
 [...] ²¹⁹

I've put wisdom in the images
 For every one of my texts to be almost a fresco
 Sometimes it resembles a session of hypnosis
 As the ambience is set at the moment my voice arises
 A mysterious poetry occupies the subconscious
 And it's the griotic art from the south we sense
 I've waited long for the nothingness to come to life (*néant s'anime*)
 For every word to find its phrase and for every phrase to find its rhyme
 The land of dreams is behind a high hill
 To write I serve myself of reality like a trampoline
 And if one day they ask me who I am, answer them that you don't know
 But if they insist, tell them that I'm Duajaabi Jeneba

As I interpret "Moment of humanity", the artist starts with his own emotions, and with the help of "writing" in his own "voice", the "Muses" and "wisdom", he constructs texts of "images", "phrases" and "rhymes" which communicate "beauty" in terms of "moments of humanity". Souleymane seems to imply that "inspiration", "imagination" and "griotic art from the south" can build a *shared* experience leaping from "reality" and the poet's "sobs" and "pure cries". The moments of humanity are able to "push the doors

²¹⁸. In French the meaning of this sentence is further highlighted by the homonymy of "poem" (*poème*) and "skin loves" (*peau aime*). I interpret this use of homonyms as a way of emphasising that the quest of the poet is to convey aesthetic – sensuous – qualities to the listener.

²¹⁹ "It seems like speech flies while writing remains". This sentence does not seem to fit the focus of my discussion, but it is, however, interesting in relation to Souleymane's overarching poetic quest (which I will treat in Chapter 10) to translate his ancestors' griotic tradition from a nomadic Fulani and African context to urban and French, and also from pure orality to what he calls "written orality" (*oralité écrite*).

of emotion” and take poet and listeners at a “voyage at the depths of souls where the thoughts and words are”, as well as “harvest wealth” from “misery”. Within the architecture of images creating moments of humanity the poet seems to evade categorisation. If “they” (who?) however insist, he chooses to go by the name Duajaabi Jeneba, “Fulfilled Wish”. I will return to the points of “non-identity” (as Damien and Antoine refer to it below) and Souleymane’s usage of Fulani on several occasions later. In the next poem, the “versifier” searches for “truth” with the aim to express it in “oratory places”.

The poets hide to write^{vi} (by Souleymane Diamanka)

Words are the clothes of the emotions
 And although our pens adorn our phrases well,
 can they really save our brothers from wreckage...?
 The poets hide to write
 [...]
 We’ve swam across the river of mud
 We’ve slept in the snow on an empty stomach and we’re still standing
 The poets hide to write
 Each serve their sentence in the shadows^[220]
 In a silent solitude that some might have feared
 [...]
 Poetry acts like a light eating shadows
 I love this state but the time waiting for it
 is not so tender
 Sometimes one almost eclipses to get there
 Notorious versifier,²²¹ every rhyme is a cascade
 In oratory places the audience don’t like bland phrases

²²⁰ This sentence, *purger sa pénombre* is presumably a pun on the expression *purger sa peine*, which means “to serve one’s time (in prison)”. Adding *ombre*, “shadow, darkness”, the sentence suggests something like serve their time in the shadows, darkness.

²²¹ The derogatory meaning of “versifier” is intended. In another poem, which I will come to shortly, Souleymane calls what he is doing “art ignare” (“ignorant” or “brut art”).

In my life, I've written more texts
 than stars reflected in the large Lake Chad
 I've searched for the truth in the lines of every enigma
 In every tale and every riddle
 I've interrogated the good mediums to chase the bad djinns
 [...²²²]
 I've run for the horizon on every page
 With the energy of the ancients possessed by Jazz
 To not have to play hide-and-seek with the devil
 The poets hide to write
 [...²²³]
 It's in solitude we learn conviviality
 And too bad for those who deny it
 The light goes green/verse and orality goes through us²²⁴
 Language/the word is an indispensable key
 Outside, they ask us for all-purpose words
 The poets hide to write
 It's not a legend Grand Corps Malade, look at us
 We've swam across the river of mud
 We've slept in the snow on an empty stomach
 and we're still standing
 [He continues in Fulani]

The poets' work is to clad the emotions with words. An activity he must carry out in solitude, and which Souleymane describes with metaphors of hardship. But poetry can

²²² "And I've answered Amiini when my mother said *Mbaalen he jam* to me" Again a line that adds little to my focus here but is important in the next chapter when I discuss Souleymane's mixing of Fulani into the French language.

²²³ "It's not a legend John Banzaï, look at us / You and me, it's writing that unites us". Souleymane had for a long time a very close artistic relationship with the fellow poet and fellow bilingual "immigrant" John Banzaï (of Polish origin). Their coproduction include a collection of poems, "I write French in a foreign language", which has inspired the title of the following chapter.

²²⁴ I find the three following lines, stanzas *verbe est une clé indispensable / Dehors on nous demande de mots de passe-partout*

“eat darkness” and perhaps even “save others from wreckage”. The actual *poietic* creation is a bringing forth, an unconcealment, of “truth” hidden in “enigmas”, “tales” and “riddles” – thus in language – and through consulting “the good mediums” to chase “the bad djinns” who lead one astray. And the poet avoids the worst djinn of them all, the “devil”, through “running for the horizon” – an expression reminding me of Heidegger’s (1971) poietic measurement for man, found in the “dimension” spanning earth and sky – on every page he writes. Through sharing their “energy”, Souleymane writes himself into the history of “possessed” jazz musicians. In another poem – *Art Ignare* (“ignorant” or “brut art”, a term he borrows from the painter Basquiat) – he refers to similar “ancients”, but this time in soul and gospel, emphasising that they had not learnt musical notation to be able to sing. I find his point in this poem to be similar: Artistic creation springs from other sources – summed up as a kind of “possession”, or collective “hypnosis” as he said in the previous poem, perhaps – than knowledge of formal notation.

When the “lights” turn both “green” and “verse”, the French homonyms (*vert* and *vers*) suggest that poetry is ready to go or has free way. And, when the road is free “orality goes through us”, the slammer poets who practice oral – in contrast to literary – poetry. Words are indispensable, since “outside” – of perhaps solitude, oratory places – they are asked for “all-purpose words”. The French original for “all-purpose”, *passe-partout* means a “master key”, thus a key that open all locks of a particular set. Together with “word” (*mot*) however, *passe-partout* means a word or expression that has become trite as it is carelessly or arbitrarily (over)used.²²⁵ Language thus is a master key in response to the triteness that is demanded of “us”. The term for “language” or “the word” (*le verbe*) Souleymane has chosen, has a quite literary tone, and it reminds me of something he once wrote on his Facebook page: “I have sublimated the language of Molière without ever offending it. [...]” The indispensably master key Words might thus be “the sublimated language” of poetry, developed in solitude and shared in oratory places. In the next chapter, I will argue that by poetic “sublimation”, Souleymane also means his translation of the griotic lyrical tradition of proverbs and expressions into French.

²²⁵ Source for the word “mot passe-partout” <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=69283> (accessed 22.09.2011).

However, what are the trite all-purpose words that are asked of “us” outside of the circles of poets? These stanzas are extremely vague, but I will attempt a guess. The second part of the Facebook citation says: “[...] Which politician dares to say that I’m not French?” Thus, by sublimating the French language (with Fulani oral tradition) through his lyricism in the circles of poetry, the poet can face the triteness, banality of politicians and others who question his – among other things – Frenchness. As he says in *Art Ignare*:

I’ve grown up here and it’s not always cool [*marrant*]
When you fit the description (*réponds au signalement*) and they don’t believe
you even you swear
On what is most dear to you, my sister

To “fit the description” I interpret here to mean to be stopped in identity controls on the basis of being Black – even if “you’ve grown up here” – or similar acts of discrimination. Souleymane has grown up in a deprived and ethnically heterogeneous suburb outside Bordeaux, and he comes from a hip-hop milieu and sometimes dresses in the *jeune de banlieue* style. However, it is not only a question of Frenchness. In the next phrase in *Art Ignare*, he describes himself as:

It’s me, the dunce (*cancre*²²⁶), dog-eared sheets and full of ink spots

And elsewhere in the same poem:

I haven’t been much to school
My teacher called me a kind of idiot
Tell him, if you come across him, that I earn my living by the sweat of my
pen

²²⁶ In addition, the slammer Hocine Ben describes himself as a *cancre* (dunce) in one of his poems. A *cancre* is someone who does not do his school work, as described in the poem of the same name by Jacques Prévert (which presumably many slammers know of, as he is popular in the milieu): “He says no with the head, But yes with the heart. He says yes at what he loves, He says no to the teacher.”

Through using the Words and sublimating language, Souleymane earns his living. His words are capable of bringing emotions from a subjective solitude to inter-subjective experience. But why is it, that although poetic and *poietic* language is a master key capable of unconcealing truth through beauty, it is hardly capable of describing who the poet, or Souleymane is? The closest language comes, is “Fulfilled Wish” in Fulani, the name his mother gave him when he was born. In *Art Ignare*, he retains this unidentifiable, unclassifiable classification describing himself as “Inhabitant of nowhere, originating from everywhere” (*Habitant de nul part originaire de partout*). Let me thus suggest that in the autopoietic curvature of “oratory places [where] the audience don’t like bland phrases”, Souleymane recreates and unconceals his “very ontological ground of being” (Kapferer 2005b: 49) exactly as someone who does *not* fit any descriptions. The poietic “truth” the poet finds in solitude and shares with the audience in “moments of humanity”, is thus a master key leading to the door of the unidentifiable, unclassifiable poet, in contrast to the person on the “outside” – of the curvature – identified and categorised in all-purpose triteness.²²⁷

To understand how the work of the artist can create a bridge from deeply subjective “sobs and cries” to an inter-subjective “truth”, through “emotions” clad in “words”, is what I search for in this chapter. Souleymane shows how important the craftsmanship and creative force of the artist is in this “voyage at the depth of souls”. I will now go through the craft and creation of the poet from a less poetic and more practical perspective, beginning with the “words as clothes for the emotions” and – in the third part of the chapter – ending with “the truth” which can be found within the being of poet as well as listener.

Words and social wizardry

In Chapter 6, from the session at L’Atelier du Plateau, I called Dgiz a wizard of social relations. This terminology is taken from the anthropologist Bruce Kapferer’s use of

²²⁷ In this chapter, I argue as if Souleymane succeeds in escaping the “all purpose” categories of “outside” in slam sessions. I do not consider it relevant for the argument here whether this is unanimously the case, but I will return to this question in the two subsequent chapters. For the record however, I will remind of Dgiz’s discussion on the stereotypes in Chapter 4, as he feared that Souleymane could become the “token” Black (*noir de service*).

Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of human perception and emotions. The potential for sociality created by the human senses is the "magicality of human existence," Kapferer writes²²⁸ (Kapferer 1997: 2). Through the senses the world enter us, and through them we exceed our individual bodies and reach out to others in the world.²²⁹ Dgiz often says that his work – be it in arty theatres or on street corners of the banlieues – is to create bridges, *passerelles*, between people, bridges built out of communication.

Dgiz who became Dgizhors – Dgiz outside (prison) – through writing and rapping, thus uttering aloud, explains his work in youth workshops in disadvantaged suburbs like this:

I reconcile them with language. You can systematically give a response to a problem, a question, an emotion; response with words. It creates openness (*ouverture*): "It's possible to talk about it. And if you don't want to, you're not obliged to express it in front of others, you can just write about it. And if it's too strong for you, you can create characters and write about them," [like he did with the superhero Superguez and the other food dishes in the previous chapter]. And we can communicate together, and on equal terms (*être à l'arme égale*). You can find a paper and a pen everywhere. It's fantastic: This whole art, this whole discipline, concentrated on the small space of a paper! It's for free! That's what I want to put across: "Say it! Hold on, we don't have to go spend money in the pharmacy or on consumption. You must have emotions, and procure them, and then share them, together." [...] And also, I inspire (*donne envie à*) others when I perform my own texts and explain them [the texts]. There, it's an artistic encounter (*rencontre artistique*), because I'm

²²⁸ The "category of 'magic' [as opposed to the "rational" or "deterministic"] governs the interpsychic relations between men in society and, more precisely, our perception of others. [...] It follows that man is always a sorcerer [wizard] to man and the social world is primarily magical" (Sartre 1962 [1939]: 56).

²²⁹ To establish whether Dgiz uses the notion of magic similarly to Sartre is not the point here. What Sartre and Dgiz have in common however is to highlight how words and the artistic use of words can help people to procure and share emotions and thus create bonds with others and (re)establish faith in the world around them. Dgiz has seen the transformative forces of magic operate like this in his life and in artistic encounters, and he often thanks the "fairy" of his life (the name of his girlfriend and fellow artist, a classical violinist with the name Viviane, like the fairy from the Celtic tale of the wizard Merlin) for keeping him on the right track. This point adds a dimension to his story of the helping poets in the forest in the previous chapter.

an artist. I specify that I'm an artist who intervenes, not a teacher or educator. I'm a good pedagogue, all the better²³⁰, but before everything else, I'm an artist. For me, the art is important. When you enter into art, you enter into magic [²³¹...] I share, I share, I transfer and I inspire. For me, that's what's important: To inspire others to do the same. On the good road.

The first step towards the magic of art, according to Dgiz, is to put the emotions into words and share them. This has worked for him, and now he helps youth who stand in front of "the tunnel" (of violence, hatred and perhaps recurring prison sentences, see previous chapter) that he has passed through, in order to find another way around it, as he expresses it. According to Dgiz, art is capable of a transmission and opening of the self as well as an opening towards the world (see previous chapter on how art brought Dgiz out of the suburbs and back into Paris, and further out into the world). But in order for art to bring this about, its rules must be followed.

And in order to share, one has to consider one's audience: An audience, as I have described in the two previous chapters, whose particularities are its heterogeneity and ethos of listening and convivial receptiveness. Most slammers (who started with writing and not with improvising) said their writing changed when they began to perform their texts in front of an audience. Artists who engage in both slam and rap, say the heterogeneity of the slam audience as well as the lack of conventions (in rap) broaden their way of writing. Probably because of the experiences as well as therapy, he has gone through, Dgiz is very sensitive to the way the voice can – and according to him should – convey a wide spectre of emotions.²³² At his workshops, Dgiz teaches the young participants to transform their rage and insults into art, which he himself has learnt. This is an example of what he tells them:

²³⁰ This is a reply to a conversation we had after I joined him on some of his workshops, and I commented that I thought he was a good pedagogue. He uses it as an opportunity to again emphasise that it is the art that is important.

²³¹ Poetry, or art defined according to Dgiz: "La poésie, c'est de mettre des images avec du fond et parler." – "To connect imagery with substance/heart/depths and talk." Like Daminen and Tô say, poetry concerns feeling and form.

²³² After we once heard a man's voice bark impolitely and aggressively over the loudspeakers at a metro station: "Attention to the closing of the doors!" Dgiz used the incident as material for improvisation over at the next session at L'Aterlier du Plateau.

I'm never against the ideas of the writers of the texts, but I have to orient them: "I can agree or not with what you say, but you can say it. You have the freedom to say it, but being a professional I'm obliged to warn you that you might have a problem." [...] For example? A youth who writes a rap: "Fuck Sarko." "That's so facile!"²³³ There you insult a person whom you don't know, and whom even 30 million Frenchmen have voted for. [...] I know what you want to say, but if you express it like that, you're being ridiculous. And in addition, people will say; "the rappers blahblahblah – the rappers are animals, and they can't even talk..." [...] And if you bring your rap to a show and I invite children and their parents - if you say such things, you will shock the children. [...] Do you want to say dirty words in front of children? And there might be old people there as well. You're only 15, and they might be 70. Calculate the difference. Do you think that they might not think the same thing? And if they do, how would they say it? If you change it a little, you'll have the same meaning but different words. You can change it a little to reach them. There, you're in poetry, you're in the rules of art." That's what I want to transmit: Keep the free speech (*libre parole*), but attention: which speech, which words.

In this quote, Dgiz is concerned with how marginalised (young, in this case) voices can reach out if they are translated and subsumed into the rules of art.

The focusing of language, and speech as the person's acoustic signature

The formulation in language has the double capacity to articulate something for the individual as well as bringing people together in a shared concern, the philosopher Charles Taylor writes (1985).

²³³ Dgiz uses the French (and English) word "facile" just like Bourdieu describes the word's function in distinguishing between "pure taste" and vulgar, easy, *facile* taste (Bourdieu 1984: 486). The view Dgiz here, and in the previous chapter, exhibits concerning suitable topics and suitable imagery for poetry, is thus another example of how slam disaggregates unified sets of distinctions. I hinted at this in Chapter 6 and it will be an important issue in Chapter 9.

To express something, to formulate it can be not only to get it in articulate focus, but also to place it in public space, and thus to bring us together qua participants in a common act of focussing. (Taylor 1985: 273)

For Charles Taylor, the issue at hand is the creating of a person, and he sees this double feature of language – of inward as well as public formulation, or focusing – as fundamental in this process. He defines a person as a self-interpreting agent, where standards articulated in language form the basis for the strictly human capacities of imposing values and making choices and life-plans²³⁴ (Taylor 1985). The recreation of a person in the virtuality in ritual dynamics (Kapferer 1997; 2005a; 2005b) would entail to reformulate values and life choices. If I reinterpret in Taylor's words Dgiz's anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, the little girl formulated her problem in an articulate focus and brought her class together "qua participants in a common act of focussing" (Taylor 1985: 272). As interlocutors in a common space of disclosure the girl and the listeners participate in a conversation of what it takes of values – and practices, I would add to Taylor – to be fully human. In the space they created together through sharing and listening, they simultaneously *practice* together the (reformulated) values of being human, perhaps in terms of individual strength, empathy, compassion, solidarity and encouragements. In a similar way, Souleymane's poems search for an unclassifiable, unidentifiable (but absolute) humanness. In Dgiz's story, the reconstructed person becomes reality.

Taylor opposes two (historical) views on what constitutes the person. According to him, there has been a move in the direction of internalising personhood with the "human significances" of imposing values and making choices and life-plans. "Disclosure" of these significances and moral evaluations is no longer seen as taking place in public, but in the mind of the individual. When the public "space of disclosure"

²³⁴ I have three theoretical and one methodological objection to Taylor's article, but I find his main conclusion on the relationship between the role of the person as interlocutor in a public conversation and the establishment of human significances (value judgements etc springing from self-awareness) convincing and useful. My theoretical objections concern 1) an overemphasis on language in negligence of acts, practice and facial and bodily expressions, which I will return to shortly; 2) A simplistic notion of culture; and 3) An ignorance of notions of power. Methodologically, the article is poorly empirically grounded.

disappeared, so did also the understanding of the person as inherently (and unchangeably) an interlocutor, a participant in a common conversation. In contrast to this modern notion of the person, he sketches “earlier societies” where language created a public “space of disclosure, [...] a locus where things emerge at thier [sic] fullest, clearest, most salient; where the archetypes emerge [...]” (Taylor 1985: 277). Taylor’s article is poorly based empirically, but as far as I understand it, public rituals described by anthropologists like Victor Turner and Bruce Kapferer can qualify as contemporary public spaces of disclosure of human significances.

If only the “modern person” could rediscover the central role the *public* usage of language has in the construction of the person, Taylor (1985) claims that an emancipatory power can be found in the modern development. He mentions three dimensions of this development: 1) An increased understanding of the process of self-transformation (gaining ground when the spaces of disclosure were unified and internalised) has lead to more freedom. 2) The freeing of meaning of worldly things from structural cosmic determinates and instead emphasising the role of the human language in classifications (thus their immanence and this-worldliness). This enhances human responsibility for the fate of the individual. 3) The moving away from a dependency on conversation with other humans as well as with spirits and ancestors in order to maintain ourselves as fully human persons has made inner, monological thought preceding dialogue possible. As Souleymane says, the poets hide in solitude to write. This enhances individual originality. These three dimensions

might point beyond to a post-interiorised understanding, in which we could preserve the modern understanding of freedom, responsibility, individual originality, while reinstating the insights, about significance and conversation which have been lost. There is, or course, a broad movement of modern culture which attempts something like this... (Taylor 1985: 278)

As shown in the previous chapter, most practitioners of slam have experienced the therapeutic potentials of uttering their thoughts and problems in front of an attentive audience. Many have also experienced the empowering and even substantially

transformative effects this can have on their life situations. Within the public space of disclosure – or autopoietic swirl – that I claim that slam sometimes creates, the *freedom* to transform your life or your classification, your own *responsibility* for this process and the possibility of individual *originality*, from Taylor’s discussion, are acknowledged and appreciated, And according to Handelman’s (2004):

To do controlled transformations, a ritual form must ‘know’ it is doing this, in order to recognize change as both property and product of its operation. Curvature creates the existential knowledge of *what* it is that is curving, as distinct from whatever realities the curve emerges from and returns into. (Handelman 2004: 15, italics in original)

I interpret slam as a public space of disclosure, with “existential knowledge of what it is doing, like Handelman describes the autopoietic potential of curvature in ritual. The “controlled transformations” include acknowledgement of collective obligations and dependence, as well as of individual freedom, responsibility and (artistic and personal quest for) originality. The pervasiveness of the notion of *vivre ensemble* and the obligations of the social contract in French society in general, and the slam scene in particular as Dgiz and Yo talked about in the previous chapter, point to an understanding of the relational and public constitution of the human. This understanding is valid both in function of *le citoyen* and as a fellow human to a larger extent than Taylor seems to recognise. Or perhaps he would have seen Parisian slam as part of the “broad movement of modern culture” that he hints at in the article.²³⁵

I find Taylor’s concept of public space of disclosure of human values to be highly relevant in the analysis of the workings of slam space. His logocentric focus is however very problematic in general and even more so in a performatory art form. Dgiz, Damien, Antoine (Tô) and other presenters emphasise that slam is not only words, but also mimes and a performance of the whole body. And when the angry youth in the workshops learn to put their feelings into words, one of the first things Dgiz teaches them is how the usage

²³⁵ Or is there a difference here between the liberal Anglo-American societies and the Roussauian social contract in France? This will be discussed in Chapter 9.

of the voice transmits meaning.

In the review article “The Reorganization of the Sensory World”, Thomas Porcello, Louise Meintjes, Ana Maria Ochoa, and David W. Samuels (2010: 60) refer to recent research on language and discourse and show how it rejects the “mentalist framing” – recognisable in Taylor’s article – and instead highlight communication “as a multisensory experience.” “The life of discourse is physical, material, and emotional as well as intellectual” (2010: 60). Speech not only transfers thoughts from one mind to another – like Taylor seems to imply – but is “rather the acoustic signature of the whole person” (Porcello et al 2010: 60): Speech marks emotional states, age, geographical region, gender (Porcello et al 2010: 60) and – I must add, with enormous importance in French society – social background.

Grammatical, morpho-syntactic, intonation contour, metrical, generic, gesture and bodily hexis, and other sensory organizational aspects of discourse are all orchestrated for the purposes of presenting multi-layered messages to the senses. (Porcello et al. 2010: 60)

The anthropologists John Leavitt and Lynn M. Hart take as their point of departure that most ethnography shows that definitions and usages of each sense around the world are multivalent (1990: 80). To acknowledge the multivalence of the senses means to move away from the traditional general theory of communication developed by Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong which reduces semiotic systems to the sensory channel by which they materialise. Leavitt and Hart emphasise that there is a difference between a semiotic system and a mode of perception: Systems of signs are often expressed through several sensorial modes and keeps “a virtual reality above their realisation” (Leavitt and Hart 1990: 80, my translation). They are, in Victor Turner’s language, “multivocal” symbols. All sign systems also have a “multisensorial” foundation:

to talk implies not only audition, but also vibrations of the throat, the “paralinguistic” apparatus of gests, and often the image of the interlocutor. (Leavitt and Hart 1990: 80-81, my translation)

Middleton²³⁶ builds on the same multisensory physical reality of sound and broad multivocality of meaning in order to explain the surplus of meaning given to poems when they are read aloud.

Sound, like the drama of authorship, and the tension between speech and writing, provides a resource for poets to extend the semantic range of their poems. It can add another level of conceptual complexity by creating complex networks of association via sound and iconicity, and kind of layering of ever fainter echoes and distant meanings. It can also open into the senses through the material experience of sound waves themselves, and the bodily knowledge of their production. (Middleton 2010 [1999]: 242)

The materiality or physicality of communication, at the physical level of creation within the body, as well as dissemination into other bodies, is clear in Souleymane's two poems. Moreover, the poet searches "for inspiration for the poem to be gentle like the caress that the skin loves", and "the ambience is set at the moment" his voice arises (from "Moment of Humanity"). According to Middleton, quoted earlier in this chapter: A "sound heard as the voice of another also produces virtual [kinaesthetic] responses through the bodies of the audience" (2010: 241, see also n50, p. 252).

In this part of the chapter, I have shown how emotions (are) communicate(d) between people not only by speech, but in multiple ways, as multivocal expressions on a multisensory ground the slammers consciously make use of in their poetic wizardry. Speech and communication thus transfer sentiments from the shadowy solitude of the poet to the receptive listeners in oratory places. Through this master key of poetic and poetic communication, doors to the inmost unidentifiable can be opened.

²³⁶ Middleton (2010: 233-242) goes to task with the Saussurian dogma of the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified and discusses convincingly how words can be "motivated" in various ways.

Part three: Techne and poiesis in the poetry of slam

A relation of plenitude, without codification

In the third and final section of this chapter, I return to Damien and Antoine's formulation of the aim of the performance to find the means to create the "fullest possible relation between actor and audience". I understand the fullness – *plenitude* – of this relation to be of vital importance in order for the communication Souleymane talks about to occur.

The germ for my interest in their work was sown when my friend – Laurent, the same person who invited me to my first slam session – strongly recommended the play *In Full Conscience and Honesty* (*En nos âmes et consciences*) by Damien and Tô.²³⁷ When I saw it, I was very much struck by some – hard-to-define – sentiments of willpower, *joie de vivre*, and an urge to create a place to resist. Our (Laurent and Jean from the ethnographic introduction in Chapter 2) reaction to the play corresponded in quite a profound way exactly to the kind of reaction Damien and Antoine seem to seek and try to describe the creation of in this interview.²³⁸ When listening to their answers, and by working through the written transcript of the interview several times, the contours of a whole aesthetic theory dawned on me, and I will now try to convey it mostly in the words of Damien and Antoine themselves, broadly as the interview unfolded.

Antoine starts to answer my question on defining a good slam performance by explicating the inward relation:

If you hide behind all sorts of stuff, we'll see it. And the other stuff you'll not

²³⁷ When I saw the play, I was indeed aware of the distinction between slam sessions as open and shows/plays as predetermined and closed, however the sentiments this play evoked in me reminded me very much of the energy and emotions brought about at slam sessions. This sensation, I described in my research blog a short while after I saw it: http://www.anthropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2006/theatre_in_full_conscience_and_honesty (accessed 16.05.2011). In the interview, neither Damien nor Antoine seemed to distinguish between their own performance in a slam session and their performances in their own show/play where they perform the same texts. The distinction between session and show thus seems relevant on the level of accessibility to the stage, of course, but not necessarily at the level of the artist's commitment in the individual performance.

²³⁸ In addition, it is particularly significant in terms of multisensory communication that they were capable of creating such a deep and meaningful experience for me, with my limited understanding of French.

show, we'll see that too.^[239] Suddenly, there's a certain fullness (*plenitude*) to be seen, as well. It's to find relations with oneself as well. [...] We try to be in that place (*endroit*), in a humanity that...

He stops himself, but Damien intervenes: "No, no, no! It was good!" Tô: "Maybe I'll answer questions you'll ask later..." Then Tô tells how he started in slam:

I suffered in theatre and wasn't satisfied. When we were going to put up a show with my own texts, with Damien as director, we didn't succeed in staging the show with me, and we had to use an actor. I started investing myself in slam because I had arrived at the end of my career as an actor. I'd never succeeded in finding myself on stage. I always tried to give something else than myself. It was a great suffering, and it's often a problem for artists. It was in slam that...

We are interrupted by loud music – illustrating well Yo's point in the previous chapter that too loud music is to the detriment of a good conversation. As we are the only guests in the bar, this early afternoon, a lovely early summer day, I go and ask the DJ to turn down the music. Antoine finds back his thread, and continues:

It was at the slam *terrain* that I managed to find something very personal, which actually spoke directly to my own journey (*parcours à moi*) and that was to find a place for myself (*endroit à moi*) where I could combine acting (*comédie*), the text and the speech (*le texte et la parole*) and the rhythmicity. Something I'd very rarely found in theatre. It allowed me to go into a fullness, a plenitude, in myself. That was a given moment after 15-20 years in theatre and 10 years of writing. And suddenly there was a juxtaposition of tools that completely intersected (*se croiser*)²⁴⁰: When I

²³⁹ Perhaps this is why it is important for Dgiz not to *hide* the alcoholism and violence in these performances, even though he does not make much poetry about these themes. (See previous chapter.)

²⁴⁰ Cf. Dgiz's definition of a good slammer in Chapter 4.

heard Saul Williams²⁴¹, it was something I had obscurely searched for. Hearing him put words on something I had searched to say. – I practiced a very rhythmic language, but it was neither in the codification of rap, nor in poetry. That was what I had searched for. It was my need, my necessity. And as I already had the rhythmic, interpretive and writing tools, I looked for that door in myself.

In addition to the craftsmanship, the *techne*, or Antoine's "tools", the fundamental relation between audience and actor hinges on being in touch with yourself – reaching (for) a *plenitude*, or being sincere, as Dgiz puts it, while Souleymane described how he searched for "truth" through "serving his sentence in the shadows". However, the place of necessity in you is only one part of the relation of plenitude, and sincerity. Antoine continues:

I also call the kind of place that I responded to a collective necessity. And my work as an artist is to respond to that as well. You ought to be in a certain humanity before being in a certain art.

I ask Damien and Tô why they found this in slam and not in theatre. Damien:

Slam is a new, virgin ground, without the pre-established codes, as in theatre. At this virgin ground, we found a place to experiment. We needed an emergent movement and we couldn't exist as artists in the traditional milieu with very established codes, established networks, families, with a whole apprenticeship we'd incorporated and to which we tried to reply [...] And we felt all the time that we got it a bit wrong (*peu à coté de la plaque*). [...] But on this virgin ground, we found the place to experiment with this relation between what we are and what we want to say.

²⁴¹ Saul Williams is a US American poet, slam poet, hip hop artist etc who played the lead role in the film *Slam* by Marc Levin which according to many brought the term "slam" to France in 1998 when it won *Camera d'Or* in Cannes and the Sundance Grand Jury Prize.

The *plenitude* is thus an intertwining of replying to a necessity in you and collectively in others, and the question then is to find ways to reach and express this necessity. Antoine calls the theatre in France either pure entertainment, or “bourgeois/intellectual” contemporary theatre, which sterilely criticises theatre with the forms they have learned in theatre school: “Caught in [...] codes of the game that very rarely brings you to yourself”. The problem is “that you’ve got to be someone else to be interesting.” On the virgin ground of slam, however, could they perhaps search for poetic and poietic master keys? “To be in a certain humanity,” is that similar to the moment of humanity Souleymane reaches through “beauty”? Damien continues:

In slam – until now, but references start to develop here too – there’s a form of truth that develops between you and the audience. People don’t come to see you because you have a name, or because it’s a particular place, or because you’re in that network, or put up that author, but they come to see if something will happen or not. And if nothing happens, they give nothing. [...] With the slam audience, something happens or it doesn’t. It’s people of all ages and from all milieus. It’s a sort of synergy.

This uncertainty is probably one of the fundamental attractions of slam: You never know in advance, what the night will bring and there is always a small danger of disappointment.

No identity but human identity and an intrinsic dimension

Damien:

In theatre, the relation between audience and artist is truncated (*tronqué*). It’s not an intrinsic dimension, but it corresponds to a schema. They participate in the reference, even if they snore or are bored. They don’t experience much humanely, but “he’s the director to see, really a genius.” It’s academism, dead and empty.

The “intrinsic dimension” is the relation they try to develop between the personal and collective necessity. The opposite is to “correspond to a schema”. To the question whether this codification and system of references is about to develop in slam as well, Antoine answered that on the one hand the record industry formats slam in a certain way, as urban poetry, “highbrow rap” and conscious rap. The danger of codification Damien and Antoine, as well as many others, refer to is the popularity of Grand Corps Malade, and the attempts of the media and record industry to define slam as a particular style from the “9-3” suburbs with the characteristic rhythm of GCM’s poetry. Like I pointed out earlier in the chapter concerning the possible effects on the autopoietic curvature, that people come to become famous not because they have something to say, as Chantal Carbon put it. However, Damien continues, and is thus more positive than Chantal and Yo, slam on the ground – in workshops and small venues – is not like that. Here, “everyone finds their own way of writing, their language, their own unique expressions. The work on the ground is less visible, but far more important than the publicity and propaganda.” Antoine develops this point with a normative finger pointed at fellow slammers:

There are not artistic identities within slam, there are human identities that intersect (*se croiser*). If slam will continue to exist at all levels – that means on the open stages, with all ages, all the styles, with all the social stuff (*trucs socieaux*) – it is fundamental that the artists originating from the slam scene are clear concerning their identity and that they use the non-identity of slam to create their identity (*Se servir de non-identité de slam pour se créer une identité*). [...] There exist identities that will suit more or less everybody. It’s not something crushing (*ecrasant*) where everybody does the same. No. There are loads of tribes who develop something fairly similar within the tribe.

I interpret the “non-identity” of slam to mean that slam is utterly heterogeneous in terms of styles and participants. The slammers ought to maintain this heterogeneity in words

and deeds and develop their own style and identity. Antoine's last point interestingly echoes Dgiz, who Damien and Antoine cooperate with (they belong to the same "tribe", one can say), but who come from a different background artistically as well as in life. Dgiz: "Everyone brings their own identity, their own path (*parcours*). And that creates a huge community that can guarantee for all the others and represent all. [...] We are the physical spoke-persons, physical and alive, from the communities originating in our society." Slam thus blurs the boundary between artistic identity and human identity, according to Antoine: "It's an identity of form and content (*form et fond*)," thus of what I term sincerity. I ask if they can spell out the relation with the audience. It is clear that sincerity – *form et fond* – is intrinsic to it. Damien:

The relation to the audience is very mystic. Often, when you're on stage, the first instinct you'll have is to create something, a certain projection... that will create something that isn't you, phrase something unnatural, that isn't you in our life.

Antoine intervenes: An incapacity to move...

Damien repeats, and adds: To add emotion... It's not enough to simply say what you want to say. That the spectator won't feel certain things, so you pump up the emotion to give more. And didactics: You'll play in a way that what you want to say isn't sufficiently understandable, and you have to explain everything very carefully. All the stuff you'll put on in order to hide what's missing, in order not to be naked on stage.

I ask: In slam, is one naked (*dans le nu*)?

Damien: No, in slam there are people who hide as well...

Antoine adds: And who dress up/assume well (*bien révetu*).

I interpret their comments to mean that not all slammers are "sincere" – "naked" or in touch with oneself – but the good ones try to be. However, the last comment from Antoine could also be interpreted in the way Chantal Carbon commented on Nada in the previous chapter: That they (re)construct their character well, in a sincere but nevertheless "dressing up" manner. Damien finishes his line of reasoning:

But in our career as actors, we've realised as we've gone along, that you've got more to remove than to...

Antoine: to produce.

Damien: It's the moment on the stage that has taught us that. (*à produire pour exister. C'est le moment de la scène, esthétique de la scène qui nous a appris ça.*)

In slam, there are "human identities that come together/meet", as Antoine put it or, paraphrasing Shakespeare again: The players are mere men and women. However, the autopoiesis in the curvature or the phantasmagoric character of the virtuality dynamics let the players reimagine themselves: Slam seems to blur everyday life with the organisation and practice of ritual slam space, and human identities and personal life with the constructed character. The poetic and poietic "master key" of slam opens the door for Souleymane to evade all identities "they" stick on him, and recast himself as "inhabitant of nowhere originating from everywhere".

Art as collective communion

Antoine again:

The question we quickly asked ourselves is: When do we really reach art? When do we leave the principle that we do the stuff and play the personalities, and suddenly you are the personality and the thing does itself? (We've written a manifest on that). The moment when you're no longer trying to produce the things, but the creation takes you and you do it with it, being caught by a creation larger than yourself. And you, inside that, you might be a lot simpler than the system of projection Damien talked about. [...] *Voilà*, I'm myself and I work with that instead of with what I'd like or prefer to be.

"When the creation takes you" seems to be exactly the autopoiesis of the fold (or Giant's

kettle) Handleman describes. In addition, the autopoietic space includes members of the audience as well.

We've always had this kind of collective worry (*souci*). It must have a meaning (*sens*), and a meaning that isn't anecdotic and that people just say "That's nice" (*C'est sympa*). Always question ourselves about a meaning that must be an important and essential nourishment. It's also that! Few people understand what's the meaning of art, culture in society. It's that! To produce essential nourishment (*nourriture essentielle*) for the being of each, to the beings, and share that together. We've always returned to that, the questioning, the necessity, to find a fullness (*plenitude*), an entirety, within ourselves as well as within the audience. To create this collective communion that is the object of art.

The "collective communion" is both the ground that is playing out – the actual fullness in the relation – and the force of autopoiesis, creating new meanings. I presume the collective communion corresponds to the "certain humanity before a certain art" Tô emphasised the importance to be in, which again seems similar to the sharing of Souleymane's "moments of humanity".

The blurring boundary between artists and audience is not only a question of accessibility to the stage; it is also a part of the "controlled transformations" (Handelman 2004) set forth by the "ritual experts". In order to explain how they experience the difference between slam and theatre – between "plenitude" and "projection" – Damien brings up the theatrical convention of "the forth wall": In theatre,

the stage is like a closed space where the people live among themselves. [...] It's a closed world, and you are a spectator of a closed world. There's no opening between the stage and the room.

This convention is there to create a sense of realism, which is broken or tampered with if the "wall" is crossed. Slam on the contrary is not only defined as the constant physical

movement of people crossing the floor, it also functions largely on various forms of communication and connections between performer and listener.²⁴²

And it's true, that we in our search for this kind of fullness in the relation between audience and artists... how to put it? This forth wall is very protective. When you always count on a tour-retour [as in slam], the relation is constructed as one goes along.

Antoine: And if you're not hitting the spot... (*et qui est a coté...*)

Damien: What's on the side, is on the side (*et qui est a coté est a coté*). And afterwards you ask yourself the question but why is it on the side? Often, the comedians in theatre say that oh, the audience today weren't very jovial. [In slam], you ask why you didn't succeed in drawing the relation. But of course, the audience has a responsibility also: A relation is made by two.

In order not to be "on the side", one must write for the (heterogeneity of the) slam audience, as Dgiz taught his pupils, and "mainly talk about everyday people with everyday concerns in an everyday language," as Damien explained.

Advancing towards a free thought, and a liberation from the "truth" of politics

When I ask Damien and Antoine whether their writing changed when they started to perform it, Antoine reflects on the kind of "space where things are starting to be said" for the individual as well as for the collective – a space created by words about something that until then had been not only unsaid, but also not fully thinkable.

Things that were felt collectively, but weren't said. [...] We [he refers to discussions with Sandra and Damien] put into conscience something that is experienced by everyone, but isn't formulated. Everyone lives it, but in an obscure and mysterious way, and with sorrow, because it rubs (*frotte*). That's

²⁴² Slam seems also to be realist, where the no-props rule enhances the sensation that there is no breach in the closed world including *both* performer and audience.

the object in many texts and the objective will be to formulate it because suddenly there exist words on those things.

Here the necessity for self and others is apparent. Damien continues Antoine's line of reasoning by reflecting on the function of language:

The formulation is the enunciation of the thought. The thought, even to itself, [...] it settles (*se pose*) from the moment it is formulated, as in a conversation. And the fact that you say it, you convince yourself. You share it, and *voilà* that's what I think!

They speak to each other. Damien: "To search in writing for that place (*endroit-là*)."
Tô: "Place of fragility". Damien: "To cultivate and share that kind of thing. [...] And then the dramaturgy build the kind of framework so as many as possible can follow it."

Their point seems similar to Taylor's (1985) in the sense that a common focus is created between you and your listeners through the formulation in language. Taylor however seems to write himself into the constructivist tradition after Durkheim in the sense that humans *create* classification, focus and meaning through language. Antoine on the other hand seems to *find* a meaning deep within his own being which communicates with the beings of others. In contrast to Taylor, his point seems to be a spiritual one. To my knowledge, he does share this spirituality (transcendence?) with many in the milieu, perhaps except Souleymane. That language – together with the multivalent performance – is not (only) constructing but also able to convey (immanent) essential truths that can be shared seems however to be a widespread opinion in slam. As Chantal said:

If you base it on your experience, on your own sentiment, the more you use your own personal experience, the more the others will be touched by it, because they will feel it, because they know it's true.

Antoine:

We've succeeded in writing texts that corresponded to a necessity for others, not only for us. We must keep that, and at the same time go further. [...] More clearly rub on the places where we're hindered to think. And at the same time, for us, if we want to liberate ourselves, if we want to have a free thought, advance towards a free life, we must start to think like that ["rub on places where we are hindered to think"].

Tô reminds me here of Michel Foucault who at the end of his career aimed for a double liberation of subjectivity:

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality, which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault 1982: 216)

Can the "master key" of poetic and poietic communication unlock the "individualization [...] linked to the state" for the participants in the "public spaces of disclosure" that I claim slam can be? Within the freedom of the autopoietic curvature, Souleymane evades the classification that "fits the description" and Dgiz evades the sheepfold.

Antoine continues the exploration of life and the free movement of thought:

We'll formulate [...] texts that attack the consensus of thinking that forbids the movement of thought. [...] For us, it's our big fear but also big discovery that a thought is nothing but a part of a movement. Six months later, you can have another thought.

Damien comes in: The truth of a thought is something alive, organic²⁴³. At one moment, it's organised, it's full and the next it's dead. Because life is always in movement... The truth is a perpetual search. Because it's an organic movement, just like life is an organic movement.

The dynamic movement of a slam session can perhaps convey truth in several manners. Kapferer finds the most general point about the force in ritual to be found in the unfolding dynamics, the movement itself, since sensory perception itself is dynamically organised. The dynamics of the ritual “simultaneously becomes the ground and the force behind the meaningful constructions that are woven into the dynamics” (Kapferer 2005b: 41). The sensory perceived truth in the “ephemeral moments” of the slam session I suggest is the heterogeneity of perspectives, one following the other, within – approximately – equal time slots and with – approximately – equal attentive reception. Another aspect of the truth is the integration into reality of until now unsaid experience Chantal Carbon described as becoming “public”, “real”, “recognised” and “accepted”.

When the conversation with Damien and Antoine turned to questions concerning truth, their perspective quickly slid outside the self-referential and self-organising space of slam and into the politics of the country. Damien promptly introduced a distinction between the “living, organic truth of a thought” – in the fullest possible relation (in the auto-poietic space) between people – and the claims for truth by politicians:

To put the finger on it; [...] “this is good, that's settled, for always. I've got the answer, and it's a good one! [His voice is unusually energetic and slightly aggressive, as he mimics a politician's way of speaking]. In addition, it's *my* thought, what a chance.”

Antoine: At the same time, in our ultrapropagandist, propagandising even, society, everything is made in a manner for us to think in a “stopped” way.

The guy who's voted by the largest part today, all his work is that. His

²⁴³ The idea reminds of Nada's point in the previous chapter: Poetry is an art of bare necessity, in the sense that it gives (*never definitive*) replies to existential questionings. Kapferer also stresses that sensory perception is dynamically organised (Kapferer 2005b: 41).

rhetoric is nothing but that; one day there won't be any bad guys anymore. The bad ones will get what they deserve... It's a fantasy!

Damien interrupts: Many who haven't voted for him is in that fantasy as well. He, he's the bad one; they, they've got the truth [...] For me, Ségolène Royal and Nicholas Sarkozy have got equally many reactionary and bourgeois thoughts.

Antoine is silent, and Damien continues by saying, quite aggressively, but with his own voice this time, that the subsidised and “engaged” French theatre has exactly the same mechanics. I ask them to explain something they commented on recently in relation to the *prix Molière*, an annual award for theatre. Damien:

It's the subsidised guys. The Molière ceremony is held in the middle of the housing estates (*cités*) but there isn't a single Arab or Black who come to their thing (*truc*), because they [the organisers] don't care (*souci*) for the audience/public (*public*) at their doorstep, but still they come there to say that theatre is important [with a pompous voice]. It's for a clique.

The truth of slam suddenly becomes very palpable to me, compared to the “projections” of society in French politics, media and among the “subsidised guys”. It reminds me of how I found the slam sessions as a more real version of the socially and ethnically heterogeneous France – La France Métissée – which I saw on the streets in Northeast Paris, than the “whitewashed” France that was actually projected in public discourse and media. Outside the oratory places of slam, there is still the “sheep” thus the ones who “fit the description”, and the somehow unmarked rest.

Damien and Antoine are about to return to the rehearsals for their show later that evening. It will take place at a venue that often host shows by established slammers (but not open sessions), La Java. Curiously related to the discussion at this point, this place close to Metro Belleville epitomises the distinction between the local Bellevillian France Métissée and the closed “cliques” Damien and Antoine talked about. La Java apparently

takes care of the people at its doorstep. It is allegedly the first nightclub in Paris and prides itself with its long history as a meeting place for the crooks of Belleville and the Parisian bourgeoisie, like the 19th Century *goguettes*. It was here daughter of Rue de Belleville, Édith Piaf started her career, and here apparently Django Reinhardt discovered jazz and the accordion.²⁴⁴

Summing up

Just before Damien and Antoine have to leave, I ask about the physicality of slam. It turns out to be an important question, tying much of what we have talked about together. Tô sums up:

Writing, speech, rhythmicality/musicality, the body and the necessity. [...] It's a bodily release that also speaks a dance of words: It's a whole, where everything is connected. The body says and communicates what I want to communicate. [...]

When you *search* for the flow, you don't partake physically. [...] Inside of it [a performance], I don't think about what I will do with my body. I don't "mentalise". There aren't any *gestures* at that moment, because then one isn't in the present. One is already passed it, into the system of projections. [...] In the first show we put up, we worked with a Burkinabé, and together we put a lot of effort in working with the fact that the connection with the stage, that is to *be*. He played on a djembe, and if you play with psychology, you're dead. Contrary, if you start vibrating like the skin of the drum, you don't think anymore, you *are*, and you hit the thing, you try being in the same place.

To *be*, not to psychologise or categorise, and to be in a certain humanity, are perhaps the master key of slam. I will explore further what this means in the two following chapters.

²⁴⁴ <http://www.la-java.fr/historique.php> (accessed 26.09.2011)

Coda: The sound of poetry

In this afterword, I will try to explore what made Antoine's performance at the session described in Chapter 6 stand out in my eyes. In my perspective on slam as ritual, the *techné*, craftsmanship of poetry and performance, is of major importance to create the necessary quality and sensuous experience of the session. Damien and Antoine have very thought-through ideas on the tools of slam, which I will now explore. When I ask them what they have learnt from their experience in theatre school and plays, Damien brought up the poetic craftsmanship for which their company Uppercut is known. He connects this to the physicality of sound, a point similar to the one the poet and scholar Peter Middleton made. Damien:

I've integrated much from my education as an actor, the whole of the classical French dramatic tradition from the 17th century: Racine, Corneille, Molière... I've worked on the versification, on how a French verse functions. [...] Working with the versification, I understood physically that (Tô: "voilà!" as he breathes out smoke in a way that shows the physicality of sound and breath) that the energy course, that means the physicality of air that resonates in language, is a vector of meaning. As an actor, I understood that if I went back to the written partitions of the dramatic poets on the constructions of prosody [...] If I went back to that, by a stroke (*out d'un coup*, he snaps his fingers), I transport a lot more meaning and incarnation than if I played a personality. [...] The energetic force of the language (*langue*) is vector of meaning. We don't need stuff on top of that, psychological stuff, to make meaning. The emotion is in the partition of words. Little by little, you find your freedom. Little by little, there's stuff within you that finds its freedom with the simplicity of being in the moment that you are on the stage. (*des trucs dans toi qui trouve sa liberté, avec la simplicité d'être dans le moment que tu es sur la scène*).

Damien talks here about how aesthetic forms work on people's perceptions, feelings and

sensations, and they mould cognition and experience in particular directions. In this final part of the chapter, I look at the conventions of poetry and see what kinds of meaning they bring along to a slam session.

Poetry can be characterised by five conventions (Janss and Refsum 2003), which all adequately describe many performances in a slam session. Most of the conventions also play an important role in the particular aesthetic, sensory impression good slam poetry can give the listener. I will list all five, in ascending importance to the question of *techne* in performance poetry. First, much poetry (as well as much slam) is poetological, a meta-commentary on the function of poetry (slam), as the texts reflect on what poetry (slam) is and should be (Janss and Refsum 2003: 30-36), and also like in Souleymane Diamanka's poems "Moment of Humanity" and "The poets hide to write", what (oral) poetry *does*.

Second, according to classical Greek literary theory, poetry is the literary mode with closes proximity between the speaker and the described subject spoken (Janss and Refsum 2003: 18-26). Janss and Refsum emphasise the distinction between the proximity to the subject spoken about, which is a question of the use of language, and on the other hand the issue of psychological subjectivity (2003: 21-26). According to them, the conventions of lyrical language convey feelings and intimacy. Here, we can recognise Damien and Nada's (as well as Middleton's) insistence that *sound is a vector of sense*. Meaning and emotion are thus better conveyed to an audience using poetic tools of language and breath, and bodily organs like the stomach and throat as producer of breath and sound, than by adding emotions, gestures and pedagogy to the performance. On the other hand, if the utterances in the poem are not sincere, lacks asseveration and are "wrongly redressed", the tricks of the trade cannot carry you very far in the slam scene at least (perhaps nowhere in art?).

Third, poetry and slam are usually short and can therefore be experienced as a whole, in one go. This particular intensity makes it possible to gain a particular recognition or understanding (*erkjennelse*), an epiphany (Janss and Refsum 2003: 28). Fourth, and connected to the previous point as well as the next (concerning the musicality of imagery of poetic language), is the density of meaning (Janss and Refsum 2003: 28-30). In an anthropological language, this concerns what Turner termed the multivocality

of symbolic imagery (Turner 1967). Janss and Refsum connect this density to the relationship poetry has to a magical tradition, using musicality, and the riddle using imagery (Janss and Refsum 2003: 29).

Musicality and imagery in poetic language is Janss and Refsum's fifth (2003: 14-18) – and for this purpose, most important – convention of poetic expression. Lyrical language is saturated with sound patterns (*melos*, Gr. song, lyrical poetry), images and metaphors (*opsis* Gr. ὄψις). Janss and Refsum refer to Northrop Frye's discussion on *melos* and *opsis*, or babble and doodle as Frye termed it. *Melos* is the use of rhyme, rhythm, assonance and alliterations. According to Frye, the use of *melos* connects etymologically as well as historically to ritual (Janss and Refsum 2003: 16).

The [etymological] radical of *melos* is charm: the hypnotic incantation that, through its pulsing dance rhythm, appeals to involuntary physical response, and is hence not far from the sense of magic, or physically compelling power. The etymological descent of charm from *carmen*, song, may be noted. (Frye 1957: 278)

Opsis is all kinds of mental imagery evoking the senses, playing on visuals, auditory, olfactory, taste, tactile and kinaesthetic. Frye uses it to describe the fusion achieved in much poetry between abstract and concrete, concepts and the spatial and visual:

the radical of *opsis* in the lyric is *riddle*, which is characteristically a fusion of sensation and reflection, the use of an object of sense experience to stimulate a mental activity in connection with it. (Frye 1957: 280, italics in original)

Melos and *opsis*, musical and textural qualities of language, make possible “a production of meaning that is not limited to the meaning of the words alone” (Janss and Refsum 2003: 18). This is an important part of what I have tried to show in this chapter.

In order to untangle this dense introduction to poetry, I will return to the – in my opinion – lyrical highlight of the slam session presented in Chapter 6, Antoine's “Brakeless Orpheus”, and try to decipher its performatory strength.

Brakeless Orpheus^{vii} (Antoine Faure – Tô)

As I described in Chapter 6, Antoine walked casually up to the limelight, taking off his jacket on his way, thoughtfully stroking his chin before he starts. Unlike many amateurs, he does not take a deep breath and a step back before he visibly steps into his stage persona. Quite the contrary, Antoine is sincere and close (identical?) to the speaker, to the extent that in the audience I perceive no distinction between persona and person (only through scrutinising the video does a slight glitch appear). He starts quietly then gets agitated as he recites, punctuating the words with his hands and arms. I will start with an analysis of the craftsmanship/*techné* of the French original. The English translation in its entirety follows right after the two paragraphs of analysis.

Je suis braise dévalant des vallées sans chemin
je suis nécessité sans sentier
je suis pièce de chair en chantier
je suis perché [cécure]
je suis par vents et par mots, je suis paravent, je suis coupe feu
je suis fenêtre ouverte à toutes les portes
je suis bris de verre, je suis fleur morte
je suis à ciel ouvert, je suis bleu

I am glowing embers tumbling down the valley without ways
I am necessity without path
I am piece of flesh in under construction
I am high [caesura]
I am by wind and by words, I am folding screen, I am firewall
I am open window to all the doors
I am breaking glass, I am dead flower
I am open-air, I am blue

What first strikes me is the repetitive and parallel use of the personal pronoun “I” (*je*). This anaphora²⁴⁵ is not only aurally evocative, it also creates a very strong proximity between the subject of the poem and the performing poet, a closeness which is also very much in line with Antoine’s reason for leaving theatre for the sake of the nakedness/bareness of slam. To describe the “I”, Antoine creates visual images through the consistent use of metaphors (*opsis*). Some of the metaphors generate a double imagery,²⁴⁶ by creating an expression, such as *par vents et par mots* (literally “by wind and by words”) which paraphrases the idiom *par monts et par vaux* (meaning “always on the road”). The result is a double image of movement (which continues the imagery of the previous lines) as well as introducing the importance of “words” (*mots*). The next line paraphrases another expression, *porte ouverte à toutes les fenêtres* (“open door to all the windows”, meaning open to all stimulus).

The octet (eight lines stanza/verse paragraph) contains one rhyming couplet (the rich rhyme of two out of three syllables in *sentier – chantier*) and the enclosed rhyme (of *feu – porte – morte – bleu*, all rich rhymes). There are also several rhyme-like structures within the lines: In the first line between *dévalant* and *des vallées* (pronounced “de-valā” and “de-valé”); in the second there are consonance (matching consonants) and alliterations (matching initial consonants) between the s-sounds in *nécessité sans sentiers*; and in line three and four “ch” makes up an alliteration in *chair* and *chantier* and a consonance in *perché*. Towards the end of the stanza, there is also something in the use of metaphors and sound²⁴⁷ of the language that makes it lighter, lifting it up in the air.

²⁴⁵ An anaphor means to begin the line with same word or phrase. It is often used in religious texts. Source: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5770> (Accessed 21.12.2011) Is this thus an intertextual reference to something spiritual?

²⁴⁶ A technique very common in the performative art of slam poetry. We also saw it in Souleymane Diamanka’s Moment of Humanity where he played on the homonym between “poème” and “peau aime”.

²⁴⁷ After I had come to this conclusion about the feeling of lightness conveyed in the text, I found an explanation for this sensation in Middleton’s article. In one of his examples in his argumentation against the Saussurian arbitrariness, he claims that linguists (without reference) have described a link between high-pitched front vowels. In addition, the idea of smallness and light, and low-pitched back vowels and largeness and darkness (a chip is a small cut and a chop is a large one.) a poet might therefore manage to convey these ideas simply by some pattern of vowels which will convey this suggestion subliminally (2010: 239). In French, the vowels making up the last line become (almost) increasingly frontal: /ouvert, je suis bleu/ [uɐvɛr ʒə sui blø] starts with the posterior [u] and continues in [ɛ] which is frontal, then back again to the central [ə] and finishes with the frontal [ø].

I am glowing embers tumbling down the valley without ways
I am necessity without path
I am piece of flesh in alteration/under construction
I am perched [cecura]
I am by wind and by words, I am folding screen, I am firewall
I am open window to all the doors
I am breaking glass, I am dead flower
I am open-air, I am blue

I'm not finished
sometimes not wily, so proud of being flight
I am smokey phoney (*fumiste enfumé*), a lone(ly) wanker
I am moon-air fool [*sot l'air de lune*, also a French homonym with “solar moon”], I am jump in the dune
I am art of air, I am era that looks-like-saying nothing
I am wandering in a divine laugh
I am the one we are waiting for, so much less and rarely more
I am pell-mell hirsute and hairless, feathered monkey under the bus shelter
I am unglued medulla glue (*décollée du bulbe*), delirious binder (*liant delirant*)
Gigantic rachidian, rachitic arabesquian

I am vertigo, I am vestige, I am ruin
I am halted world, I am earth in movement
I am bars (*grille*), I am spiral vertical spin (*vrille*), I am mine (*mine*)
I am dangerous, I am vivid volcano
I am crater surface shadow and plain
I am plant, I am flat, I am banana plantain, organ to be drawn (*organe à dégaine*)
I am sharp, beak and claw, raptor in pink flesh, I am gorilla and pig (*gorille et goret*)
I am voracious, ear, forest, plasma antenna, shuttered fortress

I am poison, aspic, “Aspivenin” [venom sucker], aspirant in a sometimes
inspired vein

I am a run of the file (*coup de lime*), I am taste of the soul (*goût de l’âme*), piece
of man

I am stone of haze, I am satin clear²⁴⁸

I am fairy dance and burst of laughter

I am brakeless Orpheus

The poem ends on a pitch and Antoine (Tô) quickly leaves the limelight. Like much of Uppercut’s material, it is not only the use of first person singular that suggests that the poem to be deeply subjective and personal. Like Damien and Sandra, Antoine incarnates the “I” in the poem as he performs it, and here the poet has even included a physical description of himself (*I am pell-mell hirsute and hairless*. Antoine has lost his hair due to an illness.²⁴⁹). While Dgiz described a more concrete struggle in *Dgizhors*, Antoine speaks not only of what it is to be *him*, but of also what it is to be *human*. Many of the metaphors are taken from nature, thus reminding us (metonymically) of the physicality of our life on earth, and he even calls himself a piece of flesh under construction. Many of the metaphors are wild and violent, and to live is perhaps likened to tumble about without knowing your way. – Perhaps to be read as a comment on the fixed “truths” of the previous generation (in “The Orphans”) as well as the politicians in our “ultrapropagandist, propagandising society” he mentioned in the interview. But to be human, I experience from Antoine’s rendering, is also to be full of contradictions – we are part of nature, but we also reflect on it, and sometimes even poetically inspired. And to be human, is also to be in touch with the divine – “in a divine laugh” and to *be* the divine – “the one we are waiting for”, however on an oh so human level, “so much less, and rarely more”: A “brakeless Orpheus” is a struggling tumbling about human, but also a poet.

²⁴⁸ A play with sounds on *clair de lune* and *matin clair*/ *pierre de lune* and *satin clair*.

²⁴⁹ This has never been an issue in our conversations or in the interview. It only came up when I asked Antoine in an e-mail for a comment on my translation of his poem.

Chapter 9 – Return to the republican cosmogony of the Tennis Court Oath

Belonging, solidarity and difference in democracy

Theme and outline of the chapter

As the slammers reconstruct themselves as persons within the aesthetic, social and political riverbanks of the slam session, they simultaneously reproduce, reinforce and reinvent the relations constituting the session. The action and interaction at slam sessions thus produce persons *and* their social environment simultaneously. They produce “artistic” as well as “social outcomes” that according to Johann (Yo) are like a utopian democracy of the early days of the 1789 Revolution: “The Tennis Court Oath”. In this chapter, I will trace the specificities of personhoods I have shown the production of in the previous chapters: “humans, not sheep”, the unclassifiable poet “originating from everywhere” and the use of “the non-identity of slam to produce an identity”. The aim is to explore the character, ethos and practice of the relations, the social cohesion – *vivre ensemble* – that is produced and reproduced simultaneously with these notions of personhood. What characterises the societal relations within slam space, and furthermore, *beyond* the autopoietic Giant’s kettle, of which the former are a product, a comment and a redress?

To answer why the person-community relations in Parisian slam take the shape they do, I will compare this specific expression of slam with its counterpart in The United States of America. As part of this comparison, I will suggest that significant differences in person-community relations between the two slam phenomena can be traced to the two different philosophies of integration dominating in the two countries: French Republicanism stemming from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Anglo-American liberalism

stemming from John Locke (Sabine 1952). Another conceptualisation I will make use of in order to grasp the interdependencies between slam and wider society, and personhood and social cohesion, is Victor Turner's perspective on the interdependency of social drama and staged dramas of ritual and artistic creation.

In Chapter 7, I explored on the level of the individual the transformative force of expressing oneself and being listened to within the egalitarian and convivial ethos of the slam session. In Chapter 8, I claimed, in accordance with the anthropologists Handelman (2004) and Kapferer (2005a, b), that the sessions gain their transformative force when folding inwards in autopoiesis (self-creation) away from society. In this chapter, wider society returns to my focus as both explanation (context) and locus for a possible regeneration and potential renewal. What role can this transformative force play in interpersonal, community-building, or societal, relations? In Chapter 8, I delved into the regenerative force of ritual. In this chapter, I will return to the classical anthropological understanding of ritual as foremost a means for members of a society to represent and reflect on their own living conditions. I attempt, however, to combine the two perspectives and boldly claim that the ritual of slam presents a fundamental, revolutionary structure – practice and ethos – to regenerate French society and mend the social drama that has haunted it for a long time. In the final part of the chapter, I argue that this is achieved through the emancipatory effects of the fluid social space that dominate the slam sessions. Here, solidarity and heterogeneity not only coexist without compromising each other, instead both are encouraged and enhanced through slam's specific practice and ethos.

The relationship between social dramas played out as part of social structures and the rituals people create in order to reflect and comment upon and redress society was a major topic in much of Victor Turner's oeuvre. In his later works, he looked at how this artistic or cultural mechanism of working through social experience evolved out of ritual and into theatre and other kinds of play. In *From Ritual to Theatre*, he centres his analysis on what he sees as an

interdependent, perhaps dialectic, relationship between social dramas and genres of cultural performance in perhaps all societies. Life, after all, is as much an imitation of art as the reverse. (Turner 1982: 72)

I will first delineate how the current situation in France can be read within Turner's four phases of social drama and how Parisian slam poetry can be seen as an interdependent part of the situation: In words, but foremost practice, slam depicts the situation or crisis, comments upon it, redresses it and perhaps even sparks into motion possibilities for change. Second, through comparing performance/slam poetry in France and the United States of America, I explore how the oral poetry phenomena represent, reflect and redress basic features of the surrounding political and social structures. The social dramas I claim slam interrelate with concern belonging, civic solidarity and democratic participation. These aspects of citizenship, or more precisely, membership in a society, I claim are shaped by the particular social and political logics of the respective polities.²⁵⁰

Social drama and republican rites: Grands pays malade – slam and crisis

Turner (1982) distinguishes between four phases in the social drama: First, there is a *breach* of norms, morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public arena. This leads to *crisis*, the second phase, and third, a need for *redress*, and a final phase of *reintegration*, *reconciliation*, or *change*. Social dramas in most societies concern the social integration at some societal scale, and usually they reveal gaps in the social cohesion. Turner reads the crisis as an exposure of

the pattern of current factional struggles within the relevant social group [...] [B]eneath it there becomes slowly visible the less plastic, more durable, but nevertheless gradually changing basic social structure, made up of relations which are relatively constant and consistent. For example, I found that among the Ndembu, prolonged social dramas always revealed the related sets of

²⁵⁰ I urge to emphasise that the comparison is uneven and unjust since it is based on long-term fieldwork in one society and only two secondary sources – written with other perspectives and agendas than mine – from the other. I therefore do not intend to draw firm conclusions about the US American material; my aim is to use it as a means to create an illuminating contrast to the French case.

oppositions that give Ndembu social structure its tensile character. (Turner 1982: 70)

Among the southern African people Ndembu where Turner did research, matrilineality – descent through the mother’s line – and virilocality – settlement near father’s place of origin – formed a continuous strain on the social structure. In France, for decades, if not centuries, *conceptions of difference* – be it religious, social, political or “racial”/“ethnic” – has strained societal integration. After the thirty glorious years of economic growth following the Second World War ending with the oil crisis and recession around 1974 (*les Trente Glorieuse*), the main social drama in France has come to concern postcolonial immigration, “The Colonial Gap” (*La Fracture Coloniale*, Blanchard et al. 2005). Social dramas are large enough to be experienced by most people at the affected scale, but they are interpreted differently according to the positioning in relation to the revealed opposition or fraction in question.²⁵¹ This social drama is experienced one way or the other by most people in France today, either as too much repentance over the colonial past and the strains that immigration is putting on national identity (as implied by “The Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity...”), or as a “colonial gap” (Blanchard et al. 2005) creating senses of civilisation deficit, as in lack of means, voice and political existence (Lapeyronnie 2005).

From the perspective of the Colonial Gap, the French social drama consists of numerous *breaches* of core Republican promises of freedom, equality, solidarity and respect, from small everyday incidents in the life of individuals to wider institutionalised structures of unequal treatment. One recent significant incident of breach was when an identity control led three teenagers to find a lethal hiding in a transformer in Clichy-sous-Bois on the 27 October 2005. The three weeks of riots that broke out in suburbs all over the country became a full-blown *crisis* of large proportions. I claim that the “basic social structures” exposed by this major social drama in France are the republican paradox of inequality. It creates “bodies of exception” (Barkat 2005) where certain children of the

²⁵¹ “The colonial gap” has probably been experienced as the main social drama for large parts of the population somehow involved with the colonies long before the oil crisis. For instance, according to the story of Louis, which I will retell in the final chapter, it has shaped and haunted his family for several generations.

Republic are stopped and checked by the police on a daily basis, “sheep” become “Generation Prison” and certain experiences, stories and viewpoints are “muzzled” (see the next two chapters for a further exploration of the latter).

The next phase in the social drama, *redress* (Turner 1982: 10), concerns a society or group’s attempt to come to grips with what has happened – to look at itself from a distance and assess itself. In Turner’s terminology the phase is liminal (from van Gennep) as it is set apart (Turner 1982: 11). It can turn also, presumably, into a self-referential fold or curvature, in Handelman’s terminology, with autopoietic potential (cf. Chapter 8). Turner suggests that this social mechanism has moved out of the domains of law and religion and into the arts (an evolution also reflected in the title of his book, *From Ritual to Theatre*). In order to explain the process of human experience and how it relates to cultural performance like ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre and poetry (1982: 12-15), Turner leans on the German social philosopher Dilthey. According to Turner, Dilthey points out that an experience is only completed when it has found an expression, “communicated in terms intelligible to others, linguistic or otherwise” (Turner 1982: 14). (Cf. Chapter 8 on the importance of communication in contrast to internal “monologue”). The self-reflexive redress stage of the social drama is therefore often turned into an artistic expression, for instance a theatre performance. This interpretive, communicating work of art corresponds to Dilthey’s final, conclusive moment²⁵² of experience (as *Erleben*, “what has been *lived* through” (Turner 1982: 12, italics in original). In the following quote, Turner explains how he thinks theatre can produce understanding of past experiences.

”Experimental” theatre is nothing less than “performed”, in other words, “restored” experience, that moment in the experiential process [...] in which meaning emerges through “reliving” the original experience (often a social drama subjectively perceived), and is given an appropriate aesthetic form. This form then becomes a piece of communicable wisdom, assisting others (through *Verstehen*, understanding) to understand better not only

²⁵² The previous four moments of experience in Dilthey’s philosophy relate to perception and connecting to past experiences (Turner 1982: 13-14).

themselves but also the times and cultural conditions which compose their general “experience” of reality. (Turner 1982: 18, round brackets and italics in original)

Parisian slam existed long before the 2005 riots, but it changed considerably in its wake. Poems by the slammer Grand Corps Malade became for many outside the milieu a means to interpret the social drama that had played out in suburbs all over France. Grand Corps Malade for several years had won slam competitions and performed his poem “Saint Denis” about his hometown of the same name. However, it was only after Saint Denis was severely struck by the riots that he rose to fame and sold 600 000 copies of the album. Some media declared him the voice of the *grand pays malade* (“the big, sick country”²⁵³) (a status he refused and said he represented no one but himself, a typical stance in slam where everyone should have their say in equal measure, and no one represents anyone). Nevertheless, his description of Saint Denis provides an insider’s low-key and experience near corrective to the sensationalist and warlike reportages – produced from inside cars and indoors, behind windows, all with a distant gaze²⁵⁴ – dominating the television news of the riots (Fagerlid 2008).

Grand Corps Malade and an expression of redress: Saint Denis^{viii}

I want to slam
for an old lady whom I’ve known since I was small
I want to slam
for the one who sees my walking-stick from Monday to Saturday
I want to slam
for an old lady where I’ve grown up
I want to slam for this suburb north of Paris that we call Saint Denis

²⁵³ This is a play on his name “Big, sick body”. The stage name Grand Corps Malade took because his tall body is half paralysed after an accident when he was 18. He was deemed never to walk again, but now he moves around with a crutch.

²⁵⁴ French media sent correspondents familiar with war zones or hired freelancers with Muslim or African sounding names to report from the affected suburbs. It was only the Swiss weekly magazine *Hebdo* who settled down for a longer period (three months) in the Parisian suburb Bondy (in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, the 93) and reported from the everyday life there.

Take line D on the regional train
and wander the narrow streets full of character
Take line 13 on the metro
and eat at “McDo” or the bistros
in a town full of pretty girls (*bonnes gos*²⁵⁵) and big *clandos* [clandestines,
illegal (worker)]

If you like to travel, take the tramway and go to the market
In one hour, you cross Alger and Tangier,
you’ll see “Yugos” and Romas
and then I’ll bring you to Lisbon
and two steps from New Delhi and Karachi
(see, I’ve revised my geography)
I’ll bring you along to eat Mafé in Bamako and in Yamoussoukro

And if you’d like, around the corner we’ll go
for a crêpe where it smells Quimper
and where it looks a bit like Finistère²⁵⁶
And then passing by Tizi-Ouzou, we finish up in the Antilles
Where there are big Blacks (*re-nois*) who says
[in creole French²⁵⁷]: “What are you doing here, my girl!”
[...]
After the market, we go for a walk (*che-mar*) in Republic Street,
the sanctuary for discount stores
the preferred street for the small, well-dressed Arabs (*re-beus*)
on low heels and with bleached hair

²⁵⁵ *Gos* means “girl” in the African language Bambara. Source:

<http://dict.leo.org/forum/viewUnsolvedquery.php?idThread=635773> (Accessed 23.10.2011)

²⁵⁶ Quimper is the capital of the Department of Finistère at the western tip of the Bretagne, the peninsula where the French pancake crêpe originates. GCM also plays on the Latin etymology of Finistère, meaning “land’s end”. Source: <http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1406523> (Accessed 23.10.2011).

²⁵⁷ “Pchit, toi aussi kaou ka fè la ma fille !” Source: <http://www.e-voyageur.com/forum/voyage-8666.php> (Accessed 23.10.2010).

In front of the shops in the souk, I'll teach you the dance
the afternoon-hanging around; you know the wandering
If one goes to the Post Office, I recommend you patience

Republic Street leads to the Basilica
Where all the French kings are buried, you should know this!
After geography, a little history lesson
Behind this monumental building, I'll bring you to the end of the alley
In a small, more convivial place: welcome to Café Culturel

There we go to chat, to drink and to play checkers
Certain Friday nights there are even slam sessions
If you want to eat for next to nothing
I know all the sticky little corners well
There one finds all the good-for-nothings, the whole un-aristocratic jet set

In the evenings, there isn't much to do
There isn't much open
except from the cinema at the Stadium [de France] where the guys come in
gangs:
Welcome to Riff-raff Land (*Caille-ra Land*)

It's not an all rosy city, but it's alive
Something happens, and to me it's cool (*kiffant*)

[...] To this fucking town, I'm more than attached
even if I'd like to put a stop to
the mobile-pullers at the square

Saint Denis, unrivalled city
Saint Denis, my capital

Saint Denis, a rather unusual city
 where you can buy Halal sauerkraut at Carrefour
 Here, we're proud to be "Saintdenisians", I hope you're convinced
 And if you treat me like a Parisian, I'll stick my crutch up...
 [...]

In Grand Corps Malade's (GCM) account, Saint Denis comprises the diversity of France with its immigration and (some) regional specialities. In Saint Denis, you find the Café Culturel with its slam sessions and diverse cultural program next door to the tomb of all (but three) French kings, in the famous Basilica tracing its history back to the 7th century. GCM concludes his imagery of Saint Denis as a place where you – in the arch-French hypermarket Carrefour – can get the typical North-Western French dish sauerkraut labelled as Islamic Halal. Despite the gangs and pickpockets of mobiles (neither one ethnically categorised, unlike much other reporting), Saint Denis appears as a convivial place, firmly planted in the history of *Ancien Régime* as well as modern, popular France. In GCM's description, difference is acknowledged – in a predominantly, however far from exclusively – multicultural (group identity-based) form, without strains on the social cohesion.

While a large part of the country found an *expression* of redress – an *Verstehen*, understanding – in GCM's Saint Denis and the rest of the album, an increasing number of people come together to set up their own *machinery* of redress and create their own expressions in slam sessions. More and more workshops are organised all over France, as municipalities understand the benefit of youths (and others) putting their anger into words and not least, arranging for a space where people feel their experiences are being heard. Slam thus works as a mode of reflexive redress. Can it however also reconcile and reintegrate social oppositions, thus contribute to the fourth phase in Turner's conceptualisation of the social drama? MC Tsunami satirises over how municipal authorities often see slam as a "magic potion" for disadvantaged youth, probably because he believes that slam cannot really heal the crisis. Likewise, when Dgiz emphasises that the slammers and rappers in workshops *anime au plus profond* – "animate at the deepest level", and give value and self-esteem to youth who easily could

have fallen into the “sheep” – he implies that slam redresses on a personal level, but not that it can reintegrate society.

I will now first explore how slam works as a machinery of redress. In the subsequent section, I intend – through the comparison with US American slam – to show how Parisian slam through its practice and ethos can provide new ways of thinking about societal (re-)integration in terms of belonging, civic solidarity and democratic participation. I will argue that due to the specifically fluid and open character of French slam, however with a strong emphasis on equal inclusion and solidarity, it has a particular potential for regenerating the founding principles of the Republic.

Slam as machinery of redress: Rioters and slammers reverse the body of exception

Why is the slam such an effective machinery of redress? One important reason is the multiplicity of perspectives following one after the other where the listener is drawn in and out of – to and fro – an experience near affective flow and an experience distant reflexivity. According to Turner (1982), meaning is achieved through reflexivity, which inhibits or is antithetical to the affective, sensory experience of “flow” in life, or in performance. Seen individually, each performance in a slam session provides a narrative interpretation. It is a meaningful structuring of past experience for others to “live through” (*Erleben*). Cf. Chapter 8 on the sense of “imaginative empathy” or “delegated corporality”, the kinaesthetic response that can be felt when watching live performances (Middleton 2010: 240). If the experience is not yet lived through, interpreted or “they’re still completely within it, it might project whatever, all or nothing,” as Chantal pointed out in Chapter 7. The performer, but also the members of audience from time to time, experiences an affective “flow” before he or she returns to a more peripheral position in the audience, where reflection is enhanced (cf. Kapferer 1984). In this chapter, I explore the meaning produced by the session as a whole, with its ever-changing perspectives, while I relate individual perspectives of the social drama of the colonial gap in the next chapter.

Creating meaning, according to Turner, relates to negotiating a fit between present and past (Turner 1982: 75). Ascribing or creating meaning concerns connecting

the emotional – or the sensational of the present – with volition or the normative, pointing to the future (1982: 75). In “Symbols in Ndembu ritual” (1967), Turner analyses meaning in a similar way, but here with the emphasis on how symbols achieve their potential. Symbols can, according to Turner, create action. Furthermore, what he calls the dominant symbols of a society becomes the focus of *interaction* (1967:24). A dominant symbol consists of two poles, one ideological and one sensory, which condenses and combines meaning. The ideological pole comprises social organisation and “norms and values inherent in structural relationships”, while the sensory conjures “natural and physiological phenomena and processes” and “the lowest common denominator of human feeling” (1967: 30). Turner uses the Milk tree symbolising mother’s milk in matrilineal Ndembu society as example. The sensations evoked by the symbol in the present generate action and interaction pointing towards the future of the social group.

In the beginning of the thesis, I quoted Johann (Yo) to call slam “very close to the Tennis Court Oath”. This oath leading to the Constitution Assembly is one of the dominant symbols of the French Republic, borrowing Turner’s terminology. By this oath, the assembly of “commoners” of the Third Estate confronted and defied the monarchy of Luis XVI in the early days of the revolution. What inspired the Third Estate into action was the denial of their egalitarian demand for one vote per head, independent of rank. Although no one other than Johann in the slam milieu has suggested this particular allegory of revolution and popular sovereign defiance, many practitioners interpret slam similarly through emphasising the egalitarian and democratic aspects. Johann had in mind the explicit breaking of the boundary between artist and audience, as well as the stress they put on the sharing of speech (one voice per head). Dgiz emphasises a related fundamental feature when he implicitly compares the heterogeneity of slam with the structures of wider French society.

All these individuals (*personnages*) haven’t been to the same school, don’t come from the same family, the same housing estate/city (*cité*). Everyone brings their own identity, their own path (*parcours*). [...] And every slammer and “slammeuse” gives with his or her path, his or her interpretation and his or her creation a place (*endroit*), a reference point, (*repère*) in society.

In Dgiz' description, slam assembles "the people", - thus a present day return to the dominant symbol of the commoners assembled at the Tennis Court Oath. All the people can now inform themselves, they do not need to be "sheep" anymore; they can be "free humans". And I suggest that Dgiz might be saying that the people of free humans, with their personal "paths, interpretations and creations", gather at slam in an act of popular sovereignty and "face the state" in terms of practicing an alternative to elitism²⁵⁸, nepotism and communitarianism of any kind. In a similar critique, Damien and Antoine (Tô) described the "subsidised guys" in the "engaged" and established French theatre as a White "clique" not taking into account the "Arab and Black population at their doorstep".

The French anthropologist Alain Bertho (2009) has documented and analysed hundreds of riots worldwide from the last decades. His descriptions of the worldview and stances, if not exactly actions, of many rioters resemble in fundamental ways that of slammers. An important category of recent riots, both in France and elsewhere in the world, erupts as a response to police misconduct and/or the attempts of people responsible to cover-up or silence the facts, according to Bertho. He interprets these riots as a call for the recognition of the dignity of the victims directed towards states that do not see all humans or all citizens as equal (2009: 77-98). These riots, he claims, contradict the pessimism of Giorgio Agamben's notions of the state of exception and its emblematic *Homo sacer* (a person included in the juridical order only in terms of being excluded from it, a conceptualisation Barkat (2005) developed into "the body of exception", the non-included member of the nation). With their "bare life" – naked life, bodies without protective gear – the rioters meet the highly protected and armed force of order, the representatives of the state (Bertho 2009: 82-84). "The riot," Bertho claims,

is usually a face-to-face meeting between people and the state over the question of the principles and foundations of public action/intervention

²⁵⁸ By "same school", I believe Dgiz hints to the school of government, ENA – *École Nationale d'Administration* – where a large proportion of politicians and civil servants have studied. The school is meant to contribute to meritocracy, but has at least two negative effects – which I would deem are well known in the French population: One, like Dgiz suggests, the French elite becomes homogenous as it has gone through the same education. Two, it, like all elite schools, already recruits in a small part of the population.

(*l'action publique*). [...] While waiting for an interlocution, or the simple lack of it [i.e. that the state engages the concerned in a dialogue²⁵⁹], the confrontation erupts. (Bertho 2009: 230-1, my translation)

The slammers, although “bare life” as bodies without accessories and representing no one but themselves, obviously do not confront the state and its representatives in same way that the rioters do. However, they express themselves in interaction and sometimes in words on the principles and foundations of the working of the state, in its denial, forgetting and its “muzzling” (see next chapter). In the sense that the slam session reawakens and regenerates the potent dominant symbol of the early days of the Revolution, the popular defiance of the Tennis Court Oath, the practice of the slammers can also be read as a stark confrontation *with* the state.

The organisation and practice of slam produce a “social” as well as “artistic outcome” as Johann (Yo) points out, which, in the perspective of Turner, can help in redressing the crisis in a social drama as it provides an understanding of past – an ongoing – events. The emotion and sensation of stories and experiences (from “their own paths”) – achieved through the *techne* and *poiesis* of the poet – are combined with the normative of the structure of the slam session: equal time, equal space and equal acknowledgement through listening and applause. If I am to go one step further in analysing the session within Turner’s perspectives on symbols in ritual, I would suggest that the session itself can be experienced as a symbol – more or less consciously, like Johann claims – of defiance and popular sovereignty during the 1789 Revolution. The ideological pole of the dominant symbol represents social organisation and “norms and values inherent in structural relationships” (Turner 1967: 30). It is the freedom, equality, solidarity and respect of all citizens inculcated in all children of the Republic in schools,

²⁵⁹ After the death of Zyed Banna and Bouna Traore in October 2005, the families of the deceased refused to meet with Interior minister Sarkozy, but they accepted to meet Prime Minister de Villepin. After the meeting, which took place four days after the death of the teenagers, de Villepin demanded a full investigation of the event. The investigation refuted most of Sarkozy’s claims, – of the involvement of the deceased in a burglary, of their earlier involvement in delinquency and criminal activity and that there had not been a police chase. These claims, which Sarkozy fronted within hours after their death became public, were probably the main reasons why the families did not want to meet him. From the perspective of Bertho, I will argue that although Sarkozy suggested to meet with the involved, an “interlocution” did not really seem to be on his agenda as he had already made up his mind – and gone public with his interpretation – before any dialogue with involved parties or investigation had taken place.

street names, public places and monuments that are played out in the slam sessions. The sensory pole of “natural and physiological phenomena and processes” and “lowest common denominator of human feeling” (1967: 30) is the “bare life” or “nakedness” of the practitioners, hardly separated from the equally “naked” listeners, and their attempt to “voyage at the depths of souls” in order to reach “moments of humanity” (Souleymane Diamanka, see Chapter 8).

French versus US-American poetry performances – two different philosophies of social integration played out in slam space

I will now proceed to the next part of the chapter. Through comparing French slam with its namesake in the United States of America, I will explore the particular conceptions of personhood and social relations – “the basic social structure [...] of relations” and indirectly also the underlying “sets of oppositions” (Turner 1982: 70) – that are played out within the social, political and ethical parameters of French slam. First, I will provide a possible philosophical context for the differences in conceptions of the basic relations and structures – individuals, communities and the state – that appear in the French and US-American performance poetry forms. As I wrote in the introduction, after having attended sessions in Paris for a while, it started to dawn on me that not only was the word “identity” conspicuously absent on stage (as well as outside), there were even hardly any talk of identity politics.²⁶⁰ The “sets of oppositions” must presumably therefore be sought elsewhere than between communities.

Intermezzo in political philosophy: Rousseau and Locke on societal integration

In the neatly comparative, but un-nuanced, essay “The Two Democratic Traditions”, the political philosopher George H. Sabine (1952) explores how freedom and difference have been attempted reconciled differently in the French and the Anglo-American philosophies of societal integration. He traces the two philosophical traditions back to respectively Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke who each inspired revolutions that contributed

²⁶⁰ I define identity politics as political claims based on collective identities, like ethnicity, “race”, religion or sexual orientation.

significantly to shaping the two democratic systems. The Puritan revolution in England was fought between religious sects who all strived for freedom of belief. It ended with the Glorious revolution of 1688 proclaiming religious tolerance and much self-determination for – at least some – religious minorities.²⁶¹ The function of the state should be “largely protective and regulative” and “cannot extend over all the interests and activities of its citizens” (1952: 457). Society is considered as different from the state, where the former provides the underlying moral structure, which the latter only supports. Men “and women, in so far as a political theory needs to consider their nature, are socially and morally adult, in short reasonable” (1952: 458).

While the revolution in England was thus fought and won by religious communities, the situation was very different in France. During two hundred years of Absolutism before the Revolution, all legal rights and duties and political privileges were tied to occupation and community membership: “Whatever rights a Frenchman possessed he had as a member of one or more such groups [...] but there was no liberty conceived as the civic or political attribute of men as citizens” (Sabine 1952: 461-2). The Tennis Court Oath is in fact closely connected to this ancient structure of society. In May 1789, the month before the oath were pledged, the assembly of the General Estates, gathered for the first time since 1615, had reached a deadlock after weeks of negotiation concerning the voting system. The Third Estate, comprising the rising bourgeoisie, craftspeople and the rural population – thus the overwhelming majority of the population – demanded that the old structure of one vote per *estate* had to be replaced by one vote per *head*. When the Third Estate was denied access to a reunion, they gathered instead in a nearby tennis court (*Jeu de paume*) and held their ground until the two other Estates joined them.

After the French Revolution, the state – the sovereignty of citizens, i.e. the people (or *men*) – considered all kinds of communities intermediating between citizens and their state as a potential threat to what ought to be a direct relationship. In England, on the other hand, after the religiously initiated revolution, membership or participation in sects and religious minorities were considered as positive for the moral development of

²⁶¹ Sabine’s article convincingly draws the larger picture in comparing the different views on the relationship between individuals, communities and the state in French and Anglo-American thought. The article has however some quaint omissions, like for instance that the Puritan revolution was peaceful for various *protestant* minorities, but was devastating for Catholics.

communal and individual life (Sabine 1952: 464). Unlike the naturally reasonable, fair and just men and women of Locke's philosophy and the liberal Anglo-American tradition (1952: 458), Rousseau has inspired a view of human beings as depending on an overarching political community to (re)acquire morality and reason, and consequently also freedom. This political community is the carrier of unlimited popular sovereignty; there is thus no separation between state and society, as there is in Locke's thinking (1952: 463). The individual renounces private rights and interests as he learns that his personal will is in fact identical to the General Will (*volonté générale*) of society (1952: 464). Private associations are both an inherent and necessary ingredient in the Anglo-American structure in intermediating between society and state. In the French structure on the other hand, Sabine claims there is no such distinction, any private association threatens the General Will of the sovereign people (1952: 464).

I will argue that there are striking correspondences between the practice and organisation of slam in the United States of America and France on the one hand and larger issues of political, social, aesthetic and personal evaluation and moralities in the two polities on the other. The Princeton based Quebecois sociologist Michèle Lamont has carried out extensive comparative work on political culture and evaluations and ethics of individuals in France and the United States. In *The Dignity of Working Men*, "solidarity" and "class struggle" appear as far more prevalent among French workers than their White US-American counterpart, but not Black Americans who exhibit solidarity and collective struggle like the French (Lamont 2000). "Personal integrity" and "principles" are seen as incompatible with "material interests" or material gain to a far larger extent in France than in the United States. The same differences in perspectives on the compatibility of "civic solidarity" and "market thinking" are also found in another large comparative work Lamont directed and edited together with the French sociologist Laurent Thévenot (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). In the French context, individual interests are more likely to be interpreted as egoism and a lack of civic solidarity and care for the interests of all. Lamont and Thévenot trace this perception of the individual as particularistic and in opposition to common good back to Rousseau's understanding of the General Will as standing in opposition to "particular interests" (2000: 323 n9). Broadly, in the United States, civic equality are more often expressed in formal terms of legal rights connected

to citizenship, while in France people are more likely to conceptualise equality in terms of solidarity and the reduction of inequalities (2000: 14, 310). The French in general thus see inequalities produced by the market as something that should be reduced from the moral ground of civic solidarity. In the USA, “solidarity” is not emphasised as an important value, instead “civic equality” is highlighted and conceived of in terms of formally defined equal rights and duties inherent in a legally defined citizenship. Here, market logic can easily coexist and even intertwine with this notion of equality (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 14, 310). I will return to Lamont and Thévenot’s comparisons later.

French and US American slam poetry

Slam poetry originated in the United States of America and still thrives. So far, there are only two studies of the slam phenomenon: *Words in Your Face: A guided tour through twenty years of the New York city poetry slam*, a kind of insider’s history by Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz (2008), and the academic work *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* by Susan Somers-Willett (2009), who is a practitioner as well as a literary scholar. Despite significant differences, US American slam poetry remains the political, social and cultural phenomenon most closely related to Parisian slam. In this part of the chapter, I will compare my own study with these two books in order to grasp better the particularities of French slam. I imply that the “multicultural” conceptualisation of a community of communities described by Sabine (1952) holds equally true for the USA as for Britain, as the two countries form part of the same liberal democratic tradition.

To set the scene for the comparison, I will first demonstrate that similar processes to the fundamental dynamics of Parisian slam can be found in US American poetry slam as well. In this thesis, I show how structuring, practice and ethos of Parisian slam create particular personhoods and subjective and inter-subjective experiences, which belonging and community are built around. Somers-Willett’s study of the slam poetry in the United States emphasises a similar transformation and confirmation:

Instead of being windows on culture, poetry slams *are* culture; they are places where interracial exchanges are made and marginalized identities are invented, reflected, affirmed, and refigured. (Somers-Willett 2009: 7)

Slam in the US connects people “interracially” and “invent and affirm” “marginalized identities”. These two processes seem similar to my findings in France, however the conceptualisation of the “entities” involved is significantly different. In France, the emphasis is on an *overall heterogeneity* – of age as well as social, ethnic and lingual background – and I have tried to show how the numerous differences blur and mix in various ways, as in fluid space. Furthermore, far from *affirming* “*marginalized identities*”, French slammers redress the social drama²⁶² of the colonial gap by reaching for moments of *humanity* (Souleymane Diamanka), by striving to become full *humans* (Dgiz) or just to *become* and *to be* (Tô).

Parisian slam as the fullest possible relation (*plenitude*): transformations, solidarity and democratic accessibility

The cradle of American slam poetry in the Green Mill bar in a (white) working-class area of Chicago resembles the Parisian cradles in working-class (but ethnically heterogeneous) North (Pigalle) and Northeast (Belleville) Paris. Slam remains a distinctly popular art form in both countries, but perhaps in somewhat different ways? The following is an account of the socio-artistic impetus for inventing poetry slams in the USA and a description of the artist-audience relationship:

Slam poets’ frustration over the academic monopoly on poetry readings and the attending highbrow airs of these events helped fuel a rowdy, countercultural atmosphere at slams, one that persists at many venues today. Audiences at the Green Mill were and are encouraged to boo or applaud the poet onstage, a far cry from the quiet attentiveness expected of audiences at the typical poetry reading. With the usual expectations of reverence and

²⁶² This is not the place to go into detail or depth on the American case, but I suggest that many “social dramas” in the USA presumably reveal oppositions relating to “interracial” issues and “marginalized” identities, as Somers-Willett puts it in quote above.

silence thrown out of the window, a different type of relationship between poets and audiences became possible at a slam – one that was highly interactive, theatrical, physical, and immediate. (Somers-Willett 2009: 4)

US slam thus started in opposition to aloof and academic poetry, a conflict and struggle between “high” and “low” poetry that have never seemed relevant and of concern to Parisian slammers. I will come back to this difference towards the end of this chapter. Briefly, as I argued in Chapter 5, the popular character of Parisian slam is foremost *inclusive*, in the respect that much of French society outside of slam is *exclusive* and hierarchical. It is political in the sense that it signals on which “side of the biopolitical diagonal” (Negri et al 2008) of repression or resistance and creativity you are on (see Chapter 5).

The construction worker and poet Smith wanted to bring poetry (back) to the people at the Green Mill in Chicago. He therefore came up with a format built around the poet’s ability to allure the audience and the audience to respond. Competition engages the audience in several ways. Moreover, the poetry itself should be entertaining and hard hitting (like in “*slamming* the door”), waking up the listeners. As a member of the jury, you are asked to respond actively to what you hear. The official rules of US slam (Somers-Willett 2009: 149) also encourage the audience to try to influence the jury with negative as well as positive comments and applause. Pilote le Hot, from the competitive “stream” of Parisian slam, said in an interview that competition (playful, and without reward) is good because it captivates the audience most strongly. This is certainly right in terms of verbal feedback from the audience back to the performer. In competition, the performance can be seen as pleading for a reaction – a good note – from the audience, whereas when the slammers do not compete in the same overt way for a scarce resource – the first place, or being ranked and graded in general – they might be freer in terms of *how* they appeal to the audience. As Chantal remarked, before the prospect of becoming famous rose on the horizon of slam, people were more daring in coming up with fresh, experimental, personal or unpolished texts and performances.

It seems that the Parisian slammer Tsunami is right when he claims that the practice of having numerous sessions without competition is at the origin of the

tremendous heterogeneity of French slam. Fewer people are likely to be brave enough to get up on stage when one not only has to expose oneself and one's perhaps dearest writings, but also put it up for grading in public. The following confession is by an established poet in the foreword of the history of slam in New York, *Words in Your Face*:

I was one year out of graduate school, and I thought it was about time that I slammed a poem at the famed Nuyorican Wednesday Night Slam. In a story almost too embarrassing to recount, I read from the page what I thought was my best poem – a poem about my dying grandfather, a real downer, as I think back – and get, I think, an average score of 5.3 out of a possible 30. [...] As democratic and inviting as the poetry slam is and as easy as that makes it to like – even to love! – slam, this does not mean you yourself actually have to slam. (Daniel Nester in Aptowicz 2008: xi-xii)

I have never heard anything similar to the expression “a downer” in France, quite the contrary.²⁶³ A young first-time slammer would very rarely if ever get such a reception in French slam, where as Dgiz emphasises, at least a “minimum of sensitivity” is demanded of the audience. There, the hosts always insist on extra applause for a debutant, and usually it is just enough to say: “this is his/her first slam...” for the audience to cheer extra welcomingly. For most *animateurs* of sessions and workshops, there is also a definite point of making as many people as possible get up on stage and slam. “Everyone can slam,” is a recurrent mantra. This proselyting and all-embracing aspect of the French slam milieu seems to lack in American slam. As the quote above showed, the competition in US slam can streamline and homogenise not only the poets who take the stage but also the themes treated in the poems.

“Therapy” plays a major role in Parisian slam as individual inspiration as well as source for inter-subjective recognition, and morality and solidarity (Chapter 7). In the

²⁶³ In comparison, a rather hardboiled thirty-something told me he was touched almost to tears by a middle-aged, white, suburban school teacher telling about her relationship to her husband who recently died of cancer, in front of several hundred listeners - probably many from her school. This was in Saint Denis at the height of Grand Corps Malade's popularity. Another, older woman, talked – for quite a long time – about the recent death of her father a Saturday night at the final evening of a week long festival at the arts squat in Belleville, perhaps a setting one would expect “downers” like that not to be highly appreciated.

US, the therapeutic aspect it is only hinted at between the lines and do not form part of the argument in the work of Aptowicz (2008: 186, 312, 341). Similarly, Somers-Willett touches upon the transformative effects (2009: 37, 95, 136) of the “liberal space” of slam where “difference” can be transmitted and recognised and can lead to a “felt change of consciousness” (2009: 7, 71). However, as I read her, this “change” takes place for the most part among the predominant “liberal, white middle class audience” as they have their liberal stances confirmed by participating in authenticating minority voices (2009: 68-95). The slammers themselves on the other hand, do not seem to go through the kind of daring therapeutic changes that has been so important in Parisian slam. Instead, certain minority identities deemed “authentic” seem reinforced.²⁶⁴

As individual political statements, identity poems can often be inspiring, enlightening, and empowering to their authors and audiences. But in a genre in which audiences reward identities they deem the most authentic, some poets may seek to write and perform poems that display their identities in ways that have proven most successful (i.e. as marginalized). (Somers-Willett 2009: 94, brackets in original)

Thus, while Parisian slam “reconstructs characters”, US slam “authenticates” certain “marginalised identities”. I will explore this difference further from various angles shortly.

To sum up this section, I claim that while both slam phenomena have a distinctly *popular* character, in the US it seems to be played out and understood as a dichotomy, while in France it creates an ethos of inclusion and solidarity and of (socio-political, not “high cultural”) anti-establishment. Furthermore, competition engages the audience,

²⁶⁴ Staceyann Chin is a highly renowned poet on the US slam poetry scene and I will cite from one of her poems in order to illustrate how authenticity, identity and transformation is treated in US slam. Somers-Willett uses the poem as an example of how bids for authenticity is the most defining aspect of the genre in the US (2009: 38). “Today I want to write / from a place where I change lives / and change people and places / cross over boundaries / of sexes and cultures and races / paint the skies deep red / instead of boring blue / write the true histories of me and you / ... / I want to write / I left my lover and / now I want her back poems / I miss Jamaica / but I’m never going back poems / I know it’s not a ten [maximum points] / but it sends shivers down MY back poems [...] real poems / poems that are so honest / they slam” (Staceyann Chin quoted in Somers-Willett 2009: 37).

while lack thereof lower the threshold for an enormous heterogeneity of participants as well as for the artist to experiment with themes and performance. Whereas a close relationship with the audience is fundamental in both art forms, it seems to take the shape of call-and-reply in the US, while French slammers search for a *plenitude* (fullness) in the relation based on a common truth and human, in the sense universal, connection. In France, therapy for the individual participant is a basic building block, while in the US it seems to be to “authenticate” an identity on the part of the performer, and a liberal stance on part of the (predominantly “White, middleclass”) audience.

In the next three short sections on art and life, solidarity, and direct democracy the aim is to delve deeper into the differences in personhood-community relations created at sessions in the two countries. By taking the similarities as point of departure, the specificities of French slam appear more clearly.

Art and life: sincerity and authenticity in performance, personhood and identity

The first fundamental similarity between American and French slam can be found in the close relations between the artwork (qua verbal content *and* performance) and the artist, thus between art and life. This is probably due to the inherent qualities of poetry in general and performance poetry in particular, as well as to recent developments in the interrelationship between art and society. Since ancient times (Aristotle) poetry is considered the literary art form with closest proximity between the speaker and the subject spoken about – a proximity sought through literary conventions not (psychological) intimacy (Janss and Refsum 2003: 18-26). These techniques (the *techne* and *poesis*) of sounds and imageries have – historically and globally – rather been declaimed and performed to an audience, than been read in individual silence. The performance “asseverates” for the content of the poem (Middleton 2010), as I showed in Chapter 8. Or, at least as importantly, vice versa: The content asseverates not only for the performance but also for the performer. Therefore, sincerity (*sincérité*), truthfulness in words and performance, is the most important attribute of a good Parisian slammer. This means that the audience must believe what they hear and see in order for them to perceive it as a good slam. Performer as well as listener must experience a truth in the relation, as

Damien and Tô explained. Likewise, in Somers-Willett's account, "bids for authenticity – both implicit or explicit – may be the most defining aspect of this genre of slam poetry" (2009: 38). Somers-Willett, however, perceives authenticity in relation to identity and sees both in constructivist terms (2009: 163 n3). Although this constructivist perspective is different from mine, the two studies share a similar concern for the ability of poetry to convey a truth, and in the case of performance poetry, a truth about the performer.

In the previous chapters, I showed how empathetic listeners function as a moral community confirming the truth and the reality of the subjective and inter-subjective transformations and experiences slamming can create. Somers-Willett describes the American equivalent of the process:

If slam judges reward poets who are authentic in their performance of an identity, and if that authenticity is actually constructed through this process of reward, then the poetry slam itself is a representational practice that *authenticates* certain voices and identities. In short, through their system of audience reception and reward, poetry slams generate the very identities that poets and audiences expect to hear. (Somers-Willett 2009: 76, italics in original)

The two processes of "authentication", or validation, by way of the listeners seem to be of similar nature in US and Parisian slam. The quote reveals, however, significant differences in how the audience authenticates preconceived ideas of identity in the US from that in France where the audience inscribes new expressions into reality through listening and acknowledging.

Somers-Willett claims that over the years, and particularly after slam poetry was commercialised on television shows and the stakes in the competition have grown higher (with bigger pots and a lucrative market of well-paid college performances), some expressions have come to be perceived as more authentic than others. In this "liberal sociopolitical space" (Somers-Willett 2009: 70), authenticity increasingly equals expressions of marginalised identity. It thus quickly became "authenticity" of minorities as conceived of by the liberal, white middleclass audience, instead of a search for the

expression of a truth lived by all (Tô) or a truth touching others because they feel it and “the more personal it is, the more general it becomes” (Chantal Carbon). Moreover, instead of identity, Parisian slammers search to express and unconceal free human beings, in contrast to the bodies of exception. Likewise, instead of the affirmative action of giving voice and authenticating marginalised voices, Parisian slam provides an equal place for all.

Community and solidarity

The second similarity I find between French and American slam concerns the role that community plays. Marc Smith, the founder of slam poetry, sees the art form as “most importantly about creating community amongst poets and audiences of diverse natures” (Smith 2003: 116).

It has brought together communities of people who share a passion for creativity, words, and performance and has turned into a worldwide movement fostering free statements and celebration of communal human spirit. It is a family of many different kinds of people who have learned to accept their differences, to argue and still be part of the family. (Smith 2003: 120)

According to the slammer Aptowicz, Smith created a “community experience” when he obliged the poets to *perform* their poems and *engage* the audience instead of reciting dully, and thus receiving positive as well as negative responses in return (Aptowicz 2008: 37). Like Smith, the scholar and slammer Somers-Willett emphasises the fundamental importance of community in an interview with Aptowicz where she describes slam as usually starting out as a “community effort” with a group of friends coming together.

There is this discourse in the slam poetry community of, *I will do it for the community!* The poetry brings you together into a certain circle and there is a sense of self-fulfillment. [...] [T]his sense that you are serving something

greater than yourself. (Somers-Willett interviewed in Aptowicz 2008: 332, italics in original)

Although the importance and nature of this effort for others do not come strongly across in their writing from American slam, her statement is paralleled by many in French slam, particularly people involved in Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous or certain active old-timers like MC Tsunami who worked for a while for Pilote Le Hot.

Perhaps Somers-Willett feels the sense of community has been neglected in her writing,²⁶⁵ because towards the end of her book, she stresses the importance of it:

My own involvement [...] demands that I highlight one thing that makes this group of artists so remarkable. Although the tenor of slam competition is sometimes cutthroat [...], the poetry slam is at its heart a place meant to celebrate its community and nurture new writers and performers regardless of their credentials. For some poets, the slam provides a place of acceptance where they otherwise could find none [...] The slam's openness has ushered in a new awareness of and enthusiasm for the oral and performative possibilities of poetry among popular audiences. But beyond that, the poetry slam has also encouraged the formation of critical communities around poetry, figuring its audience as more than consumers. (Somers-Willett 2009 137)

Community in terms of the creation of relations between performer and listener at the sessions, as well as the creation of more or less lasting bonds of friends and acquaintances outside the session, seems prominent in both art forms. In the quote from Somers-Willett, the community in question seems more to concern the support of the *poet* than the person, thus the support of an artistic career more than the reconstruction of character that Chantal Carbon talked about. Although the two are hard to separate, and

²⁶⁵ Save from a few comments, I find few descriptions of how the community functions in the American studies, perhaps partly because it is less important than in Paris or as likely because the studies – although carried out by authors with many years of participation in the movement – are not based on participant observation with the social anthropological focus on interaction.

support of other slammers' careers is also important in French slam, there might nevertheless be a difference in emphasis between the values of ambition in the US and that of solidarity in France.

In Parisian slam, other persons play two fundamental roles for the performers: One as the attentive and receptive listeners of the moral community, and the other as the "slam family" who takes care of each other. The two are clearly overlapping, since the proportion of participants is high. The blurring boundary, the proselyting, the equal time and equal reception, however, point in the direction of acknowledging the human more than the poet or the poem. As I quoted MC Tsunami in the beginning of the thesis, the practice of equality – same right to speak and be listened to – gives people a sense of an "individual existence", or acknowledgement. They become men and women, instead of bodies of exception, sheep, muzzled dogs (see next chapter). Again, the community and solidarity provide an all-embracing *humanising*, not necessarily career-building, structure.

Art as direct democracy

The third fundamental similarity I find between French and US-American slam is that they are simultaneously *social movements* and *artistic manifestations* – as Johann (Yo) said in the quote in the introduction – in that they marry an explicitly democratic ethos with an equally explicit artistic emphasis. As I have attempted to show in the previous chapters, the sensational, transformative experience for participants (and onlookers) in a Parisian slam session hinges on quality as well as contrasts or diversity: There must be quality or beauty *as well as* accessibility, a juxtaposition indicating that we can all be part of something that is *worth* being part of. The democratic ethos takes different forms in the two political contexts, each addressing the political discourse they form part of: In the American context, it is a question of marginalised voices receiving affirmation and recognition. In the French, excluded or "muzzled" voices receive their equal slot – among equals – and an acknowledgment of their right to equality.

When Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot (2000) compare criteria of ethical and political evaluation and conceptions of public political behaviour, they find salient and consistent differences between the US-American and French polities. In France, civic

solidarity is seen as opposed to inequalities produced by the market, while in the US the market logic goes easily together with an understanding of civic equality as hinging on equal rights and duties (in citizenship). A consequence for art is that popular, market demand is more easily a legitimate value in the US, where there is a strong argument that culture and art should be democratically available (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 311). Criteria of evaluation more often concern 'political' criteria like "the violation of democratic rules of public civility by [...] desecrating the American flag, insulting minorities, or spoiling a public peace" (2000: 314). In French art worlds, the criteria are more exclusively aesthetic like "seriousness, "talent", "invention, "disinterest" or "authenticity" (2000: 313-4). The strong emphasis on how slam poetry "democratise verse" in the sense that more people come and listen to poetry (Somers-Willett 2009; Aptowicz 2008) fall well into the perspective of Lamont and Thévenot. French slammers, rather emphasise the equal access to a pen and a piece of paper, and to the free slam session. At the session, there is a *sharing* of what is said as well as of the time to speak (*partage de parole*).

According to Natalie Heinich, a French contributor to Lamont and Thévenot's volume, artistic freedom in the US often "reduce artistic creation to the formulation of a message, often treating works as 'words' or 'discourses,' and identifying artistic work as the 'expression' of ideas or opinions" (Heinich 2000: 202) which can be evaluated according to political principles. She suggests that "public opinion effectively limits the autonomy of the creator" in the US (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 314). This makes Lamont and Thévenot speculate whether the "democratic culture rests on a conception of individualism that weakens the boundary between the public and the private in the aesthetic realm" (2000: 314). From this, I read that although the individual is seen as in opposition to the political common good in France; it has however an important role to play in art. In American liberalism, on the other hand, where art does not seem to have this autonomous position, according to Heinich, Lamont and Thévenot, individualism gives the same public role to the individual in all public spheres, be it in arts or in politics.

This requires that s/he [the individual] submits his/her position to the evaluation of others according to the rules of liberal democratic space. The latter creates constraints on rules of self-presentation. More specifically, this democratic space exists alongside codes of democratic civility [...] and requires that citizens contribute to creating conditions for communication with one another, by being responsive to the needs of the audience and by avoiding idiosyncrasies. (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 313, footnotes omitted)

A way to avoid being “idiosyncratic”, is to promote group interests, which are viewed far more legitimate in the US than in France: “[C]ommunality’ is built by aggregating particular interests, i.e. by blurring the line between particular and general interests” (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 318). Therefore, perhaps it is not only the dynamics of competition that give US slam the identity political expression it has, as the same rules for the individual as public being reign in arts as in public space in general. Thus, “democratic norms set limits on self-referential or singular forms of aesthetic expression” (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 313). In contrast, Parisian slam as characterised by Chantal Carbon in Chapter 7 or Damien, Tô and Souleymane Diamanka in Chapter 8 or Ucoc in the next chapter, aim for universality through reaching for the most personal in individual expressions. Authenticity in artistic work is therefore likely to mean two different things in the two political contexts, a point concluding Natalie Heinich’s article:

[A] different form of the ‘rise of generality’ occure[s] in America, where the artist’s capacity to give objective expression to common experiences is valued at the expense of subjective expression, which is criticized as narcissism. On the French side, the demand for authenticity is directly linked to ideas of interiority and originality, qualities indispensable in order to ‘authenticate’ the artistic process by placing value on singularity, which guarantees its connection to a universal experience beyond the boundaries of any one ‘culture’. (Heinich 2000: 204)

If I return to the democracy playing out in American and French slam sessions, the differences seem fundamentally linked to the particular conceptions of the individual and civic participation in the two political cultures. When art in France turns political, the individual must express itself on behalf of itself. In the world of Parisian slam, at least, the individual poet reaches for moments of humanity. In American slam on the other hand, the individual expresses itself qua public being qua spokesperson for collective group interests.

To sum up the relationship between art and politics, poetic expression and democratic participation, in the two countries, I turn again to David Graeber's *Direct Action*. Here, the anthropologist shows how practice is unified with ideology in the alter-globalisation movement through their flat structure of decision-making. "Those new forms of organization *are* its ideology", he writes in the article *The New Anarchists* (Graeber 2002: 70). Graeber (2009) describes the development of different ways of reaching consensus in the planning of actions and activities and shows how new conceptualisations of democracy take form. The conceptualisation of democracy Somers-Willett seems to have in mind when she calls American slam poetry "the democratization of verse" (Somers-Willett 2009: 137) is both the return of poetry to the people from academia and from the canons of high culture (2009: 7, 137), as well as a true *representative* democracy where marginalised voices are heard (2009: 3, 38). French slam on the other hand is rather a *direct* than a representative democracy, as Yo suggested when he called it a "utopia of democracy". Therefore, like the Third Estate who claimed one voice per head – not per estate and according to rank – slam is a direct democracy where each voice represents a singularity, a human being. Unlike the organisation among the alter-globalisationists, however, the only goal is to have their voices heard, not to reach any conclusions. All three studies – Somers-Willett, Graeber and mine – have however in common the development of new means of expression in the wake of the decline in party politics and more stable, class and profession based political alignments, which I will expand on in the final part of this chapter. The studies thus develop new notions and particularly new *practices* of democracy. Now, I will explore how Parisian slam can contribute to the reintegration and change of French society in the face of the social drama of the colonial gap.

Distinctions and fluid space – class solidarity and fluid modernity

Slam and class: openness, solidarity and struggle

In the following part, I will explore my suggestion in Chapter 5 that slam shows a means of creating “class” solidarity without being a class, or of being a class “*for* itself” without being “*in* itself”. The combination of solidarity with heterogeneity can provide an opening for a phase of reintegration of the social drama as reconciliation through various forms of blurring and mixing of difference in fluid space.

Parisian slam has neither an antagonistic relationship nor much affinity with literary poetry. Theatre, not printed poetry, is the direction in which most slammers develop their careers. The world of theatre is therefore a more important reference for French slammers. Save from a few important exceptions²⁶⁶ however, it is not perceived in binary and negative terms, but rather as a way to develop the individual and personal performances further, or perhaps more than anything else probably as a source of income. While smaller and bigger theatres of various kinds are present all over the city of Paris, poetry readings seem to be an academic Left Bank phenomenon. At the time of my fieldwork, the overwhelming majority of slam sessions took place in the Northern and Eastern arrondissements as well as the southern 13th, thus in the popular, peripheral and highly heterogeneous neighbourhoods annexed to Paris in 1860, geographically and even more socio-economically remote from the central 5th and 6th of the Left Bank. The Left Bank is still an important locus for Parisian universities and high cultural artistic life, but it seemed to play a negligible role in the life of most slammers – never mentioned perhaps not even visited during my fieldwork (probably due to exorbitant housing prices and cost of living and an increasing dominance of catering for tourists on shopping²⁶⁷).

Universities and campuses are on the other hand important venues for American slam poets. They are invited there to perform for a decent income (Somers-Willett 2009)

²⁶⁶ The exceptions were Johann (Yo), and Damien and Antoine (Tò) who criticised theatre for being stale and closed both artistically and socially, not including the Arabs, Blacks and ordinary public at their own doorstep. Thus, a quite similar criticism as Marc Smith and Somers-Willett front against the literary poetry circles in their own country.

²⁶⁷ E.g. during the occupation of the Sorbonne (an iconic Left Bank institution), it was a major discussion around the allegedly putting on fire of the traditional academic PUF (“Presses Universitaires de France”) bookshop at Place de la Sorbonne. It is correct that the locale was attempted put on fire, but the “iconic bookshop” had already moved and the place was sold to a retailer of expensive men’s wear (Delaveine).

and many seem to start out or continue with degrees in Creative Writing (like Somers-Willett herself). The different relationship slam has to universities and students reflect several differences in the two countries (in addition to the differences in the art worlds of theatre and poetry). A far higher proportion of students completes college in the United States than who studies for and achieves the Baccalaureate in France. Likewise, a university education is far more common in the US than in France.²⁶⁸ I therefore suggest that at the same time as American slam was created in opposition to the established poetry circles it has also an ambition in that direction. In France, I see no sign of any such opposition and the literary ambitions seem much weaker. Instead, Parisian slam seems more of an all-embracing political, social and artistic phenomenon as described by Yo and forming a biopolitical space of creativity and resistance (Negri et al. 2008).

Although I do not have sufficient data on the topic, it seems that US-American slam is slightly more academic middleclass or aspiring in that direction than its French counterpart. The slam milieu in France seems more heterogeneous spanning from prestigious Sciences Po to the relatively high number who quit school in their early teens and/or have troublesome backgrounds (alcoholism in the family, violence, drug addition...) and where very few, if any have the kinds of literary degrees that seem common in the American milieu.²⁶⁹ This latter fact, also reflected in its origins (see Chapter 7), indicates that Parisian slam is (even) more of a heterogeneous as well as lower class²⁷⁰ phenomenon than it is in the US. I will return to this heterogeneity shortly, but first I expand on the notion of class solidarity and collective struggle.

²⁶⁸ The percentage of the population between 25 to 64 years old that had completed high school in France and the USA in 2008 was respectively 70.0 and 88.7 (in 2001 the discrepancy was even larger: 63.9 and 87.7). The percentage of the population between 25 to 64 years old that had attained a Bachelor or higher university degree in France and the USA in 2008 was respectively 16.4 and 31.5 (2001: 11.9 and 28.3). Source: Table 420 and 421 in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance*, 2002 and 2010: <http://www.oecd.org/> (Accessed 19.06.2011).

²⁶⁹ None of the university degrees I have heard of among Parisian slammers are in creative writing, literature or French. Instead, a few have degrees in Fine Arts (*Arts plastiques*), from *Sciences Po* (*Sciences Politiques*), and Marketing and similar studies, in addition to a number of people from various more or less experimental kinds of theatre schools.

²⁷⁰ It is perhaps less and less so: Many of the old-timers pointed out how the circle of participants had widened since the early 2000s. While some regretted it (Yo said that when it becomes for the many, it is destroyed for the ones who started it, Chantal Carbon missed more daring experimentation), others were positive (Dgiz was perhaps neutral, while Ucoc appreciated the participation of more people with his own – as he saw it – rather privileged background without too many therapeutic issues to deal with).

Is it the class structure of the wider cultural universes or the class background of the slam participants that differ in the two polities? The Quebecois sociologist Michèle Lamont (2000) has shown that there is far more class-consciousness and solidarity, and notions of class struggle among French than among White US-American workers. Interestingly, Black American workers resemble the French more in this respect. There seems therefore to be little “universal” (across “racial” boundaries) working class culture or cohesion to talk of in the US. It is thus perhaps not strange that it is in “Black” cultural expressions Somers-Willett and Aptowicz find the (predominantly popular) sources of American slam poetry. In New York, Aptowicz traces slam poetry to the Harlem Renaissance and the jazz scene, both predominantly Black, but mixing high and low culture, which inspired jazz poetry which again developed into the Beat Generation²⁷¹ as well as free-styling, which again developed into hip-hop in the 1970s. Somers-Willett, whose scope is US American slam poetry in general, goes back to the Blackface minstrel shows in 19th-century Southern States, further to the Beats (Somers-Willett 2009: 51) and finally to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, subsuming all under the tag of “popular American verse”.

French slam seems to write itself into a wider cultural field, in terms of both cultural roots and the practitioners’ sources of inspiration, including politics, theatre, urban culture, high cultural French poetry and chansons. Other sources include the Tennis Court Oath, the theatre of Antoine Artaud, the Parisian salons, cafés and *ball populaires*, the classical 19th and 20th Century poetry traditions of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, the chanson tradition as practiced by acclaimed artists like Georges Brassens, Jaques Brel and Léo Ferré, and later Serge Gainsbourg. In addition, sources of inspiration also come from the places of origin of the various practitioners: Particularly West Africa and the griot storyteller tradition, but also the Caribbean Antilles, North Africa and other former French colonies.²⁷²

²⁷¹ Aptowicz writes of Beat as “of and for the working class and the poor” (Aptowicz 2008: 6), while Somers-Willett (2009) points out that the Beats for the most part renounced their middleclass background. In Somers-Willett’s analysis, the Beat Generation thus resembles Graeber’s (2009) description of a long tradition in certain artistic activist milieus from the Parisian bohemians and onwards where alienated children from the middleclass meet upwardly mobile children who rebel against oppression.

²⁷² I am not capable of tracing the repercussions of these artistic expressions in French slam, except at the level of language (and idioms), which I will superficially touch upon concerning Souleymane Diamanka and Dgiz’s poetry and use of language in the next chapter.

It seems to me that the ethos of French slam reflects the same emphasis on some kind of socio-political “class” solidarity and collective struggle similar to that Lamont (2000) found in her studies of working class France, as well as more generally in French republicanism (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). It seems that American slam reflects wider currents in a society where solidarity and struggle, to the extent they find a collective expression, are expressed in terms of “race” rather than a socio-political idiom of class. Moreover, in the US personal and material ambition seem far more widespread and acceptable in all layers of society (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Whether American slam is more dominated by (individually) aspiring lower middleclass attitudes because American society is, or because it recruits from predominantly middleclass and lower middleclass strata of society, is however not important here. My argument is that there seems to be an interdependency between on the one hand the social dramas and structures with fractures and on the other art and cultural performances (Turner 1982).

Dissolving distinctions in the cosmic time of equality

I suggest that the main fundamental difference between a US poetry slam and a Parisian slam session is that the American perpetuates and reinforces the identity politics of a multicultural philosophy of differences, while the Parisian attempts at disaggregating differences. Several factors contribute to this tendency of disaggregation of the social positions of unified differences. The slam session provides space and time under certain autopoietic conditions for participants to remould their *habitus*. Slam space with its fundamental mixing and blurring of boundaries between “high culture” of the classical French poetry tradition and the “low culture” of street culture, rap²⁷³ and everyday life at the dark and seedy cafés where many of the sessions take place also furthers and transforms a central feature of French cultural policy. In the municipal conservatories in Paris and the suburbs, where Dgiz for instance received vital help from the director and started playing the contrabass, “high culture” of classical and contemporary music, dance and theatre is deliberately made available *also* to disadvantaged youth. A central point in

²⁷³ “Not even my children can listen to rap!” one of my French teachers replied brusquely, visibly horrified by my suggestion that French culture and language were not in decline “just look at the French rap scene” (the second largest in the world, after the USA). She taught a class French arts and was a bourgeois and “cultured” woman who openly admired the present Prime Minister de Villepin’s past as a poet as well as his eloquent style of speaking.

Bourdieu's argument of the aggregation of distinctions into high standing social positions is the "natural" and "effortless" availability of culture and arts from an early age.

The general socioeconomic development also works in the direction of disembedding and disaggregating social distinctions. Bourdieu initially published his *Distinction* in 1979, when the effects of the end of *Les Trentes Glorieuses* – the golden age of French industrialism in the reconstruction after the Second World War – were not yet felt in French society. Right afterwards came a long period with deindustrialisation and economic restructuring, increasing unemployment particularly among unskilled young people and downward social mobility. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman shows how class belonging dissolves in the period he terms liquid modernity (2000). Class belonging and collective action of the high modernity of industrialism dissolve as the economy moves to a new phase. Bauman defines "liquid modernity" as the melting of "the bonds which interlock the choices of individuals in collective projects and actions – the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other" (Bauman 2000: 6). Parisian slam seems to continue or reinforce this disembedding of the individuals on the cultural terrain. Bauman's concern is that possibilities for collective senses of belonging and political mobilisation also dissolve when the class habitus and body hexis Bourdieu (1979) describes dissolve. In her comparative studies, Michèle Lamont has shown how solidarity both in terms of class and in terms of humanity still played an important role in the worldview of Frenchmen in general and workers in particular (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). At the Parisian slam sessions, solidarity is strongly present both in words and in practice. For the most part, it is limitless in the sense that it extends to everyone present who wants to participate and express themselves. To the extent that the solidarity has an antagonistic expression, the boundaries and opposition can be interpreted at two levels. On a general, underlying level, as suggested with Turner's paradigm of the social drama, the vigorous ethos of equality can be seen as a critique of the unrepugnant inequalities of the Republic, for instance as formulated in the perspective of the colonial gap. The other level relates to the effects of liquid modernity.

In *Le Temps des Émeutes* (“The time of the riots”, my translation), the French anthropologist Alain Bertho (2009) interprets a large number of riots globally since 1968 to signal a kind of democratic deficiency. As liquid modernity dismantles traditional belonging and collective action (Bauman 2000), people no longer feel that organised party politics represent them. The state does not hear or listen to large portions of the populations, as they cannot find channels to air their views and grievances. Bertho quotes French youth’s comments on the riots in 2005; they say that the riot was not political as “it was aimed directly at the state. They didn’t pass through politics” (Zavala quoted in Bertho 2009: 196). Modern politics is dead, Bertho claims (2009: 232), as many does no longer see that it concerns them and their life. Nevertheless, politicians and social scientists alike still try to interpret the riots (and other outbursts, I would add) in their own traditional language:

The riot says nothing that we did not know from before, have nothing expressed that we were not capable of expressing before. This way the event loses its status as event. It is reduced to the status of social “symptom” or political “warning”. Speech (*la parole*) is hence immediately given back to those whose role it is to analyse the symptoms and reply to warnings: The scholars (*les savants*), the responsible from the political parties, the decision-makers from the affected public policies. (Bertho 2009: 39, my translation)

Bertho here describes one of the ways in which “the muzzle” works in French society. *Les savants* and other public figures easily speak on behalf of a muted (Ardener 1975) population, and thus mute their experience even further. Bertho claims that riots often springs from a shared sentiment that something is not said (2009: 58). It is a question of “‘that which one cannot talk about’ in legitimate public space. [...] The riot is born from a silence, an absence, an omission, a paradoxical consensus that stigmatises and erases at the same time a part of the population” (Bertho 2009: 58-59). With this perspective in mind, I remind of Dgiz’s words where he explains how his job is to “reconcile the youth with language”. Slam’s solution to “the muzzle” is not to return to a representative

democracy, neither a deliberative dialogue, but the insistence on equal time and space to express oneself and to be heard.

To conclude this chapter, I will return to the dominant symbol in French society of the Tennis Court Oath and suggest that each Parisian slam session can be experienced as a return to the mythic time of the birth of the Republic. Similar to the cosmogonic act of declaring one vote per head independent of rank, like the Third Estate did prior to their oath in the tennis court in Versailles, the slam session each night re-establishes through its practice and ethos, the equal time and equal place for each and every singular individual.

Chapter 10 – “I write French in a foreign language”

The universal human and difference

Theme and outline of chapter

In the autopoietic whirlpool of the slam session, I claim that humans and relations can be unconcealed and recreated. Differences disaggregate and fixed identity labels dissolve. Unified and homogenous social positions, dispositions and habituses, perspectives and choices disintegrate or fragment as boundaries overflow; experiences and expressions mix, performances and perceptions come together within the complex coexistence of a fluid space. From the ephemeral moments of encounter there appear new understandings of the relational and heterogeneous nature of human society – in this case France – and of *a universal human of difference*. In this chapter, I will explore the *content* of the *plenitude* – the “fullest possible relation” – and “the moment of humanity”. I will look at this “certain humanity” the slammers unconceal and reach, in order to find out what a society of humans, not a “sheepfold”, might be. Furthermore, what “things [...] weren’t possible to say”, and “correspond to a necessity for others?” In short, what is the social and human ontology in Parisian slam?

This chapter takes as its point of departure that personhood and relations are simultaneously constituted in the public space of disclosure of the slam session. In order to explore the understandings of society and its inhabitants expressed and practiced in slam space, I will look at the subject content of the relations the slammers create. The relation between people gathered under the same roof has several layers of potential fullness. First, being in the same intimate space where other human beings express themselves more or less “in full honesty” (*avec âme et conscience*) is likely to have, at least, a small impact on the others present. I will discuss this basic – by this I mean necessary, elementary and fundamental – feeling of togetherness in relation to the

Chicago sociologist Elijah Anderson's notion of a cosmopolitan canopy. Second, the act of talking together strengthens the relation, almost independently of what people talk about, according to anthropologist and communication theorist Anders Johansen. Third, which will be the central empirical part of this chapter, what one says, and how one says it, makes a significant difference in the quality and depth of the relations created.

The cosmopolitan canopy of Parisian slam poetry

Before we entered the slam session at the café in the suburb of Fontenay-sous-Bois, Jean and Laurent were particularly concerned that I locked my bike well. The same thought had gone through my mind as I measured – I must admit – the hooded youths with caps loitering about outside the café. The pervasive French discourse of *insécurité* – fear in public space – mixed with an anxiety still lingering in my body after a typical *jeune de banlieue* had tried to snatch my camera right out of my hands during a demonstration a few months earlier. What happened to my prejudiced view of the young men as they entered the café and quietly found some free seats in the front row of a night of poetry?

In the monograph *Streetwise* from an inner city area in the United States of America, the sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) describes how the stereotype of black males as aggressive and criminal leads to stereotypical behaviour and ethnic segregation at the street level, which again perpetuate and reinforce the stereotypes. In the article “The Cosmopolitan Canopy”, Anderson (2004) exhibits an alternative to this vicious circle of increased mistrust and division in the urban environment. At Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market, Anderson describes how people of different ethnic origins who normally can lead socially or ethnically segregated lives come into proximity of each other and may there observe each other doing ordinary everyday things like having lunch or a chat over a coffee.

This kind of exposure to a multitude of people engaging in everyday behaviour often humanizes abstract strangers in the minds of these observers. (Anderson 2004: 28)

Anderson coins the notion cosmopolitan canopy to describe the “neutral space” where stereotypes of others or outsiders reigning in more ethnically homogenous parts of the city are put at bay (2004: 17) and replaced by a recognition of a common humanness.

Anderson does not discuss or explore the concept of cosmopolitanism. I will therefore expand on it with the British-based political sociologist Gerard Delanty’s investigation into a cosmopolitan orientation in *The Cosmopolitan Imagination* before I return to Anderson’s ethnography. Delanty proposes to see cosmopolitanism as an “orientation that emerges out of social relations and discursive transformations” (Delanty 2009: 252, my emphasis). Rather than situating the orientation in individuals, he finds it in what he calls “collective identity processes”²⁷⁴ like “debates, narratives, forms of cognition, networks of communication, ethical and political principles” (2009: 252). As I have shown, slam space consists of social relations built through performances of acts of multisensory communication and narratives within a specific ethos – or an ambience of ethical and political principles – thus, a very fertile ground for building a cosmopolitan imagination, in Delanty’s terms.

Delanty divides the cosmopolitan imagination into four levels with increasing implications. At the first level of this dynamics, the meeting with the “other” generates self-discovery as one gains a capacity for relativizing “one’s own culture or identity” (Delanty 2009: 86). Alternatively, within the vocabulary of this thesis, in meeting with stories of difference, one can reflect on one’s own personhood and trajectory in life, as well as one’s own cultural, socio-economical and political background. Delanty’s next level is the positive recognition of “the other” (2009: 86, 112, 253) with an emphasis on tolerance and rights (2009: 253). What Anderson describes as the humanising of “the other”, through reversal of stereotypes, seems to correspond to this level. This level seems also to include the dynamics of US-American poetry slams as described by Somers-Willett (2009) and discussed in the previous chapter. Somers-Willett’s study does not suggest that the (predominantly) liberal, white, middleclass audience relativizes their own worldview and identity. The *recognition* of tolerance and rights for marginalised ethnic, sexual and other identities, however, seem important for the

²⁷⁴ I find his emphasis on “cultures” instead of individuals unconvincing, but his notion of *orientation* is highly useful when exploring what goes on between individuals in a specific environment, like Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy or the Parisian slam session.

American poets as well as their audience. Thus, perhaps this process of acknowledgement of “others” actually often proceeds what Delanty has delineated as the first level of a cosmopolitan imagination, self-reflection.

Delanty describes these first two forms of the cosmopolitan imagination as not implying much change, as the encounter between self and other is largely superficial. In my view, the two simplest forms of dynamics as formulated by Delanty stay within the multicultural paradigm of bounded cultural units with corresponding identities. They can however also be formulated in terms of *individual* trajectories, as the individuals stay within their social positions or aggregated distinctions. The two next levels of the dynamics imply possibilities of change and the foundation for an “inter-cultural dialogue” (Delanty 2009: 253): The third level is a

capacity for a mutual evaluation of cultures or identities. In this case there is the possibility of inter-cultural dialogue extending beyond learning from the Other to a transformation of cultures and standpoints. (Delanty 2009: 87)

Fourth, the creation of new norms and worldviews (2009: 253) that emerge “out of the critical dialogue of standpoints and consists of a transcendence of difference and diversity towards a shared or common culture” (2009: 87). I find it hard to separate the two levels, as a transformation of perspective will necessarily transform in the direction of something, presumably the direction of the perspective of others.

I argue that these dynamics of transformation and transcendence are to some extent what take place when the slammers decidedly write for the heterogeneous audience of the Parisian slam session, as I discussed in earlier chapters. In the following exploration of Ucoé’s way of writing, I will expand on the perception of the other humans inherent in the act of writing for them as listeners. I will also explore this transformation in terms of the transformation of language – the “minorising” of the French language, in the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari (2004) – that occurs when the eloquent slammers *transform* and expand French with words, expressions and experiences originating elsewhere. This “minorising” also takes place when the slam poets – in this chapter exemplified by Hocine Ben and Marie-Françoise Salomon –

remove the “muzzle” and write against the forgetting (*oubli*) and outright denial (*déni*) of official French history concerning immigration and colonialism. Delanty’s fourth level of dynamics, I will argue in this chapter, corresponds to the continuous creation of the very ethos of the slam session, as it constitutes a “shared or common culture” *transcending* as well as *tying together* the differences of the participants. In this sense, it echoes “the indivisible, [...] democratic and social Republic,” ensuring “the equality of all participants.”²⁷⁵ However, unlike the Republic where the citizen is conceptualised as “a neutral subject who must be divested of all particularities to access those rights” (Schor 2006: 345), the slam session acknowledges and respects “all beliefs” and even all backgrounds.

Now that I have defined cosmopolitanism as “an “orientation that emerges out of social relations and discursive transformations” in the meeting with “the other” (Delanty 2009: 252), I will briefly add that the word canopy comes from the Greek word for mosquito. Evolving first into “mosquito net” then “cover” in a more abstract sense, Anderson uses it to describe places in the city that are shielded from the wariness of strangers (Anderson 2004: 14, 15) reigning elsewhere. Under the protective canopy, people relax and lower their guards towards strangers. Here, different kinds of people one would normally only be familiar with through stereotypes or “trite categorisations” appear as fellow human beings, they are “humanized” (2004: 28). Instead of shielding oneself against the stereotypical “other”, Anderson says, “such environments can encourage common, everyday taken-for-granted civility toward others who are different from oneself” (2004: 29). Under the canopy, people “feel welcome and secure enough to relax, even to the point of engaging complete strangers in conversation” (Anderson 2004: 21).

Anderson calls what takes place under the canopy at the Market “a more cosmopolitan appreciation of difference” (2004: 28). His description resembles Delanty’s cosmopolitan imagination.

²⁷⁵ Article 1 in the Constitution of the 5th Republic: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a decentralised basis.” (Source: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp> accessed 31.10.2011).

People are repeatedly exposed to the unfamiliar and thus have the opportunity to stretch themselves mentally, emotionally, and socially. The resulting folk ethnography serves as a cognitive and cultural base on which denizens are able to construct behavior in public. (Anderson 2004: 29)

Anderson's analysis shows how the zone under the canopy can provide a space offering individualised and humanised knowledge of the stereotyped "other". From exposure in a protected environment, people might bring with them experiences and understandings on which they can build new ways of behaving towards strangers in wider public space. Behaviour built not on fear, distance and separation but rather an emerging trust springing from grains of familiarity sown on a gracious ground. The simple sharing of the convivial atmosphere of the cosmopolitan canopy, of being together under the same roof, can create neighbours out of strangers and humans out of stereotypes. At slam sessions, various "others" are further individualised and humanised through the words and expressions in their own poems and performances, poems written with the heterogeneity of the audience in mind (as I showed in Chapter 7). I will now go beyond the convivial diversity of Anderson's example and explore the far-reaching roots of stories that four persons firmly planted in the diverse French soil chose to tell.

Communication across difference

Under the cosmopolitan canopy of slam, one not only *observes* or exchanges briefly with others. One also has the opportunity to *listen* to what is often close to the heart of the speaker. Listening to the experiences, musings or poetry of others helps in the empathetic process of understanding the other. Through the kinaesthetic response of sensing the movements and mimics of the performer, the delegating of corporeality (Fitzgerald in Middleton 2010: 240) can further increase empathy, as I argued in Chapter 8. Furthermore, as I argued in Chapter 9, issues of identity are rarely presented in identity political terms, but personalises, thus further humanising and universalising all experiences, be it that of a youth from the banlieue or an elderly Russian immigrant.

For Charles Taylor (as discussed in Chapter 8), language has the capacity to create a common vantage point. The anthropologist and media- and communication

theorist Anders Johansen takes this thought further and relates the use of language to the creation of cohesion in society: “Communication is an effort in direction of the common” (2003:126, my translation). It is according to Johansen communication per se that “ties our lives together [and] has an integrating force in all social life” (2003: 25, my translation). In the book *Samtalens tynne tråd* (2003) (*The thin thread of dialogue*, my translation), Johansen takes the *diversity* of modern society as his point of departure, and claims that societal cohesion cannot be based on a shared stock of cultural elements (as in various national canons). Instead, it is *contact* and the fact that we communicate *across* differences and antagonisms that bind us together (2003: 124). Basic formation (*Bildung*²⁷⁶) in this kind of society means a competence in exchange rather than a shared, substantial knowledge. An important characteristic of modern everyday culture, Johansen writes with a reference to the book *Cultural Complexity* by Ulf Hannerz, is a competence in transmitting and interpreting diverse and various elements (Johansen 2003: 120).

Johansen draws on Cicero, the cosmopolitan of the metropolis of the diverse Roman Empire, in order to provide an example for a *Bildung* for today’s society. The aim of Cicero’s Orator is to create understanding for his or her point of view. Speech is thus the basis of society, according to Cicero (Johansen 2003: 121).

Language is central, not because it is a mark of identity, but because it is a medium of communication; [...] because it makes possible participation in public life. It is not confirmation of sameness and community which is the goal of this type of Bildung (*dannelse*), but the capacity to deal with antagonisms and differences. (Johansen 2003: 122, my translation)

“The one who can voice his or her frustrations, and further grasps what the other tries to say, does not have to hit,” Johansen writes (2003: 124, my translation). This has a clear parallel to French cultural policies when subsidising slam workshops in the suburbs where the essence of ethos and interaction is to *express oneself, share and listen to others*.

²⁷⁶ Or “Dannelse” in Norwegian, which is the title of Johansen’s essay.

Communication of belonging, connections and difference

Many, probably a majority, of slammers come from neighbourhoods where various languages coexist in people's everyday life. Like the "new generation" growing up in multi-ethnic and multilingual areas European metropolises after the influx of (post)colonial migrants, they are used to communicating across differences (See Wulff 1988 discussed in Fagerlid 2001). The four slammers we will meet in the rest of this chapter all share that experience: Marie-Françoise Salomon is a retired elementary school teacher who has taught immigrant children and children of immigrants for several decades in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis.²⁷⁷ Uococ Laï has encountered cultural and lingual differences from an early age from the time he fled the war in Cambodia via four years in transit in Vietnam. Souleymane Diamanka is bilingual, and came from Senegal to a multilingual suburb outside Bordeaux when he was two years old. Hocine Ben's parents come from Algeria, and he has lived all his life in the heterogeneous city Aubervilliers, in the "red belt" of suburbs outside Paris.

Their texts are as varied as their backgrounds, and they illustrate well the wide spectrum of Parisian slam poetry. The themes have a characteristic in common, however, as they can all be read as somehow challenging official conceptions of French society. In different ways, they talk about France and belonging. A belonging against the grain, as we shall see, but nevertheless, the narrators – and most certainly, when they are performed – appear firmly planted in French soil. The – mostly implicitly described – France in their texts, emerge as a bundle of wide-ranging territorial, ideational and migratory lines. It is a France of relations, connections and mixtures, *La France Métissée*. Let me first introduce the poets. Marie-Françoise is in her sixties, and the three men are from early to late thirties.

Marie-Françoise's surname, Salomon, suggests a Jewish heritage, but for the last couple of generations that seems to be in the surname only. Her family was not personally affected by deportation. She is now retired and despite some health problems a very active participant in Parisian slam poetry, circulating on the various venues, in the suburbs as well as in the city proper. She started by reciting poems by others. Now she

²⁷⁷ She is therefore a perfect illustration that it is not always useful to distinguish between the cultural competence of the older and younger generations as Helena Wulff (1988) does.

alternates between her own texts and various classical or contemporary and experimental French poems.

Hocine Ben describes himself in poems as born and grown up in Aubervilliers, in the 93 department, “I know that the ‘9.3’ isn’t really France”, and his father tells him in Arabic accented French that “your country is Algeria”. He gives this abridged self-portrait in the poem “Citizen Ben”:

I know how to talk like the *dico* [dictionary], I don’t only address myself to
bicots [racist term for Arabs in colonial North Africa]
I talk to you if you listen to me, whatever your tag
Your national dish? I’ll eat it as long as it isn’t pork
Because my father didn’t ditch his culture in the port of Marseille [the arrival
port of most Algerian immigrants]
[...]
I’d like to believe it when this scrap of paper says I’m French
But go say it to the cops and teach them [to read] French
[...]
All this just to tell you that I haven’t got a favourite drink
I *kiff* [“dig”, from Arabic] mint tea and I know to appreciate wine
My only flag is white, I ask for peace
I’m a militant, not militaristic, nothing but my brain is armed
I am citizen Ben. (Ben 2002)

Ucoc Lai came to Paris from the war in Cambodia before he was ten years old. He is of an affluent Chinese Cambodian background. He has two small children whom he cares for while his wife for a large part supports the family. She’s an economist within the film or art industry, while he is trained in experimental theatre (because he grew up nearby the Parisian theatre school and saw all the pretty girls who went there, according to him). His style of performance seems inspired by this training, as it is untypically extravert, theatrical or experimental – he often moves into the crowd as he performs, screams in the face of audience members or lies down on the floor. Many consider him

one of the best performers on the Parisian scene. Part of his reputation is due to slightly controversial acts as e.g. when he screamed repetitiously in the face of an elderly from Saint Denis something like “I entered and withdrew. I entered and withdrew... the election booth”, at the time of the presidential election.

Souleymane Diamanka has in my opinion an extraordinary charisma and presence on stage. Souleymane is handsome, and his poetic expressions are so beautiful that few, if any, can match them on the French scene. He is also one of the few, perhaps sole, French slamers who has published his poems both in a book and on a CD. His voice is monotonous, but deep and sonorous. On stage, his pose is upright and immobile, like the prince or sculpture he tells about in his poem.

Marie-Françoise and Hocine Ben: De-muzzling the history of France

I have seen Marie-Françoise perform the following text several times, but the performance at L’Atelier du Plateau described in Chapter 6 was particularly evocative as it included Dgiz. Dgiz looks like an archetypical hooded, slightly hunching “youth from the banlieue”, of North African, even Algerian origin – thus the orientalised Other of the outlying territories, whose status has almost become that of a subaltern. However, this *banlieuesard* rarely performs without his towering classic double bass and as host and brilliant artist is utterly at home within the high culture surroundings of the sessions at L’Atelier du Plateau. This paradoxical image – high culture, or high civilisation, with the arch symbol of the “body of exception” (Barkat 2005) enhances Marie-Françoise’s message. Together with the guitarist Olivier L’été, apparently of non-migrant French origins, the three of them make a strong symbolic visual and aural impact, of the united, but heterogeneous France.

We started to run (by Marie-Françoise)^{ix}

We started to run²⁷⁸

Because the cops were following us

²⁷⁸ Uoc thought the first line was inspired by one of his texts, *Je courais...* but M-F explained that Abd el Haq had given the first line as an assignment at one of his workshops for *Slam Caravane*. Abdel told me that he was thinking of the three teenagers, Zyed, Bouna and Muittin, who ran and hid from the police identity control and thus instigated the widespread riots of 2005, whom he has written about also.

We demonstrated pacifistically
And without arms
Against the “hunt based on [ethnic] profiling” (*chasse au faciès*),
And the curfew
That was imposed on us

The demonstration was forbidden
The cops beat us
Thousands among us,
were brought to detention centres
Ten-folds were thrown into the Seine
About three hundred were killed
This happened on the Parisian boulevards
We were all Algerians
It was the 17 October 1961

He who had supported (*cautoinné*)
This savage repression
That was the chief of police
Maurice Papon

We started to run
Because the cops were following us
We demonstrated pacifistically
And without any arms
For peace in Algeria
The evening before, there had been ten assassination attempts by The Secret
Army [for French Algeria] in Paris
The demonstration was forbidden
The cops beat us

The metal gates at metro Charonne were closed
Three metal grates were thrown at us by the police
Nine among us died, being hit, suffocated, crushed
The youngest was only fifteen years
His name was Daniel Ferry
This happened at boulevard Voltaire in Paris²⁷⁹
We were all French communists
It was the 8th of February 1962
He who was responsible for this savage repression
That was the chief of police Maurice Papon

[Olivier, the guitarist, has put on fuzz-box and hits some chords from La Marseillaise, Jimi Hendrix style. Dgiz continues playing the chords on the bass, moving from side to side, whispering Maurice, until he screams the name: Maurice! Maurice! Maurice! Papon! Papon! Papon!]

We had not started to run
When the French police came to look for us at sunrise
We were the ill at hospitals
The ill in sanatoriums
The old in elderly people's homes
The children in host families

Or quite ordinary families
Sleeping quietly at home

Between 1942 and 1944 about
1560 Jews in the region of Bordeaux
among them 220 children

²⁷⁹ See Chapter 5 for an analysis of the inauguration of "Place du 8 février 1962" in commemoration of what happened at this location.

were arrested by French police
and deported
to Nazi extermination camps

The one who was behind
these savage arrests
were the secretary general
in the Police Headquarters in the (region of) Gironde
in charge of the “Jewish question”,
a certain Maruice Papon

[The audience is dead silent]

For these last facts
more than fifty years later
he was the only high French official
who was condemned for this crime against humanity
ten years imprisonment

[...]

After three years in detention
He was said to be a bedridden invalid
And he left the prison hospital
On his two feet
Ironically and contemptuously

[...]

Papon died peacefully in his own bed
In his 87th year

He always said that he had no regrets, no remorse
But we, the Jews, Algerians, communists
Because of him

We are dead,
Savagely

This evening, at *L'Atelier du Plateau*, the performance receives loud acclamation. Marie-Françoise tells me how different the reception had been at different places. At Xango, the small bar in Goutte d'Or/Barbès in northern Paris with a high immigrant population and where many of the clientele have Muslim and/or North African background, there was silence and applause. The barman, in his thirties and of Algerian background, was moved, she tells, and he showed her how he kept under the counter a *Paris Match* from the week after the 17 October 1961. The magazine was – unsurprisingly, due to the firm hand of the Ministry of Information back in the days, she tells – silent about the several hundred deaths and police brutality right in the heart of Paris. In a performance in one of the suburbs, three people in the audience came forward and said that they had participated in the demonstration at Charonne and were evidently very moved by her text. After such nights, she said she felt happy about reciting the poem. Other nights ended in arguments, once even with her friends. Some people say “Why repeat all that old stuff now?” This a rejection that is in line with many people’s view on the recent attempts at this re-appropriation of French history: Sarkozy wanted to end with the repentance, as I quoted in Chapter 4 and will return to in the next chapter.

Without being neither an Algerian, nor – to my knowledge – a communist, nor a Jew, Marie-Francoise speaks from a collective “we”, often used in French political protest through the slogan “We’re all...” (*Nous sommes tous des...*) e.g. German Jews, Algerians or another category in need of solidarity. Like this, she includes non-includes members of the nation. Here, the inclusive “we” appears in stark contrast and opposition to the injustice of the juridical system who let the perpetrator of all these deaths die peacefully as an old man in his own bed. I believe the employment of “we” enhances a cosmopolitan orientation towards the experience of others, in Delanty’s sense. That it is still a festering issue is clear from the reception of her recitals, as well as from the continuous lack of official recognition of the facts in France.

Another poem making a similar point of muting and silencing the history, is “The muzzle”, by Hocine Ben. He is a man in his mid thirties, born to Algerian parents, whom

– or particularly his mother who raised nine children – he has described with great respect and depth in several poems. He is born and still lives in Aubervilliers, a suburb not far from where Marie-Françoise taught. Aubervilliers was heavily struck by the three weeks of riots after the death of the teenagers Zyed and Bouna the 27 October 2005. Hocine Ben performs with an upright pose, usually wearing a sixpence and often a black trenchcoat in winter. In his poem, Hocine tells how he perceived what happened:

The muzzle (by Hocine Ben)^x

November 2005, my neighbourhood has a hangover.
My neighbour cries over his old banger, my telly just waffles (*discours de langue de bois*).
This year, autumn has left with two children on its hands.
One can escape the cops, but not one's destiny...

November 2005, there's a storm brewing and a smell of fireworks in the air.
From the window, elders watch their sons run.
A year has passed since then, the cameras are already far away.
We are left with our "because" we are left with our "whys?"

Why are there so many epitaphs covering the walls in our neighbourhoods?
Why is there so little work (*taf*) when our fathers were recruited by the hundreds?
Why have even our elected ones gone blind?
Why are the tricolored sashes [worn by French mayors] not blossoming in our housing estates?

I? If I were a history book, I would blush with shame,
All these words that are of no use, all these silences that confront each other.
Making memory a mined territory, an unfinished edifice.
A building site without workers, that's why I watch by it's bedside.

So, tell me then, memory, tell me why you fail?
Tell me why my family/people (*les miens*) just appear on your
White Pages?
I, I'm not Superman, I ain't got super powers
But I've got open eyes, I read through clothes of power

The world will be saved, by the poets, by the children and the crazy.
By the illiterate dunces (*cancre*²⁸⁰) who sleep in silence in you!
For me to take the mic, is to take to the *Maquis* [go underground/into
resistance]
To take one's position, even in the middle of a game of ninepins

Because I don't write for the elite, I don't write for my elected ones.
My poetry doesn't smell good, not to be associated with, my poetry smells of
(real-life) experience!
So, spread the word, tell them that yes; our walls have ears.
And after 40 years in France, our parents still don't have senior citizen's rail
pass (*carte vermeille*).

You know, you can always renovate our towers, if you don't renovate your
sight [...]
My slam waits for the chance to catch you out to revive your memory.
November 2005, they are still hot, the embers/coal [...]
To be 20 in the Aurès, to be 15 in the 93²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ The word *cancre*, "dunce", also appears in a poem by Souleymane Diamanka, which I quoted from in the previous chapter.

²⁸¹ *Avior 20 ans dans les Aurès*, is a film by the French director René Vautier. The title plays on the years of age of the conscripts to the war in Algeria and Aurès is a mountainous region in the east. The contingent in the film started out as largely pacifistic and sceptical to the war, but all except one turn progressively violent and agree to killing, torturing, pillage and rape. Source: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/avoirvingtansdanslesaures.pdf> accessed 15.12.2011. As I understand the line, Hocine likens the young, innocent conscripts in the war and the young, innocent youth in the suburbs, perhaps – as Dgiz puts it – when they stand in front of the tunnel of violence, drugs, crime and prison sentences. Souleymane – also a "youth from the suburbs" like Hocine and Dgiz – says something similar in his poem "The sorrow of angels" (*Le chagrins des anges*).

God created man, man created the poet.

The poet recreates the universe with the “ifs” and the “maybes”[...]

God, he has also created the dog, and man gave him a muzzle.

But one can’t make the big mouths of today silent, as one couldn’t make them silent yesterday!

No! One doesn’t silence the poet by muzzling his dog!

As one doesn’t put out a bush fire with a Kärcher [high-pressure water cleaner, the tool that Interior Minister Sarkozy said that he would use to clean the suburbs a few days before the riots broke out.]

When the media left after the riots, they did not bring with them the “because” and the “whys” of the locals. And not only were the locals not listened to, the poem is called “The Muzzle”, which “man” – in contrast to the creator of man, “god” – has put on the “dog”. From this, I interpret that the right to speak was taken away from someone, someone considered less than human. What does it mean, however, that the poet is not put to silence by muzzling his dog? Perhaps the answer can be found in the animal metaphor used by Dgiz. He was a “sheep” for a long time, before he became a free man through the widening of his horizon and the possibility to make choices, and see the world with “ifs” and “maybes”. Perhaps the “poets” rise from the “dogs” in a similar way? Furthermore, the bigmouths will never be and – as an important historicising of the struggle – have never been, silenced. It’s the poets and the dunces that will save the world, and for him, the writer, to express himself is a form of resistance. His poetry smells of real life, he says, and it is a resistance, from the Maquis. I suppose it is this resistance against the attempts at silencing, as well as inferior treatment, lack of equality, politicians’ negligence and the failed memory that he associates with the riots.

The evocative image of slam as a resistance to the muzzling of people, is also used by other slammers, perhaps inspired by Hocine’s poem. *Les Chasseurs de textes*

(“The Text Hunters”²⁸²) presents itself as an “Association [...] for the promotion of a language/tongue (*langue*) without muzzle.” With these two examples of the use of the word muzzle, indicating a brutal means for disciplining and particularly hindering speech and the ability to express oneself through the mouth – a defining characteristic of humans –, I have argued that the slam milieu can be seen as an active attempt at *rehumanising* experiences and existences muzzled in the Colonial Gap. The de-muzzling takes the form of free speech for all, under equal opportunity to be heard and listened to. Thus, equal space and equal time represent defining principles of republican equality.

Ucoc: French and the colonial disease

Ucoc was officially six years old when he fled Cambodia with his family in 1975. The escape through the jungle and across the border to Vietnam took two months. In Vietnam, they waited for four years to be granted status as political refugees in France. Ucoc treats the journey in several of his poems. He explains that he returns more frequently to his childhood in his writing. In his opinion, these texts turn out to be his most interesting ones. In addition, when he writes about things that keep returning to his mind in dreams or daytime, and then performs the texts in front of an audience, the thoughts finally stop churning.²⁸³

A poem treating one particular night of the journey through the jungle is *Ground Zéro*. “This key term, which is repeated over and over again, makes people understand right away what it is about,” he explains.

I talk about what moves people *now* to say something about what *I* have experienced. If I just tell it with the words of the grown up me, about how it rained and rained... [how it felt] doesn’t really convey, I think.

He then gives me the background of this poem that needed the emotionally-charged word “Ground Zero”:

²⁸² The name is a pun on the term headhunter, which is *chasseur de tête* in French.

²⁸³ To my question whether writing and performing are therapy for him, Ucoc answered “fifty per cent, and fifty per cent something else”. Art perhaps? Ucoc’s poems about his childhood flight are thus quite different examples of how slamming can be therapeutic, as I discussed in Chapter 7.

We walked in the night – as it was less dangerous – thunder mixes with the sound of gunfire and explosions, we walked in line, one step at the time, because of the mine fields, my baby sister in my mother’s arms, my sick older brother in a cart. And then we arrived at a small, isolated house where a woman came out in the rain and waited for us. It wasn’t hell, it wasn’t paradise, it was a feeling of... [he stops, perhaps searching for words].

It was not really sad or scary, he says, even when they walked over corpses, because as a six year old, he was not aware of life and death in that sense. In his poetry now, he grapples with the challenge of capturing the feelings of the young child. “How to capture and then convey, more than thirty years later, how that little boy felt?” he asks. Towards the end of another poem, he says; “It is still and always that I’m not really sure of having dreamt or lived through this”. This is how he often performs as well, in a dreamlike, nightmarish way.

Interestingly, Ucoc’s example accidentally illustrates pertinently the connection between method acting and cosmopolitanism debated in a recent thematic issue of *Social Anthropology* (Ivring and Reed 2010). In addition, Ucoc shows well how the slam poetry session can create or enhance a cosmopolitan orientation, in Delanty’s sense, as he provides means – through the poet’s *techne* and choice of metaphors – to convey an understanding of how he felt during circumstances that are very foreign to the average Parisian slam goer. Andrew Irving and Adam Reed (2010) argue that in method acting, the actor draws upon his or her own memories and emotions in order to convincingly portray the character. The actor’s own interiority is exteriorised (while in traditional acting the actor “acts” thoughts and feelings through the use of voice and facial expressions). Slam poetry takes the ideas of method acting one step further in banning all kinds of costumes, accessories and props on stage. Furthermore, in order to display the interiority in a way that conveys the emotions to the listener, the slammers must also to some extent think themselves in their *listeners* place, - like Dgiz asks of his angry young pupils: You must think about how to convey your emotions and opinions in the presence of old people and children?

All of the slammers that I have spoken to who started out with writing (and not improvisations) said their writing changed when they started writing for a listening audience. Much of the change concerned exactly what Ucoc talks about: How to get your message across to the mixed audience at a slam session? As in most everyday interaction, Ucoc takes for granted a universal human basis for the understanding between fellow members of the species. Without this common ground, the technique of resonance Ucoc – and method actors – employs – by e.g. using the weighty metonym ground zero – would find no response.

I will cite another text instead of Ground Zero, which illustrates well this process of drawing close to us something distant. This poem describes the last leg of the refugee child's journey, the waiting for the airplane to take them to France.

Seven : two eight, by Ucoc Lai^{xi}

When penetrating the airport
I had already set one foot on planet France
it was a day in July 79 at seven two eight seven two eight
I had been on stand-by in Vietnam for four years
hoping for this day of embarkation
day after day
time to learn [...]
some children's songs
some words of politeness
in this foreign language
that was spoken by the ones who had colonised my land
at seven two eight seven two eight
arriving in the womb of the airport
the reality prolonged the dream of the little boy that I was
everything was new
everything was never seen before
the sky was cloudless... that day
the sun had an appointment early that morning

I, I still had to wait for hours...there
before treading upon French soil
[...]
no one wanted to miss the plane
we arrived at seven two eight seven two eight
even though the take-off wasn't anticipated before the evening
at seven two eight seven two eight
the first thing I saw
entering the airport... was
the display indicating the time seven two eight
the night of this D-day
they had woken me up before dawn
I think the tiredness
and the sentiments I've never been able to analyse culminated
on that day in July '79
made
the time
seem to me to have stopped
at seven two eight seven two eight
when sitting on a bench
for a very long time
I didn't think about anything
I didn't want anything
I didn't have the strength to move
not the desire to move
even the mind was immobile
and the adult whom I have become is almost sure
that the baby[sic] whom I was
had to have felt this total relinquishment
just before taking
the tunnel that lead to the other world

was I born at seven two eight [no question mark sic]
there no longer exists any official paper
attesting my birth
they have added
two or three years in the passport
this passport will receive the stamp on the visa
the French Republic... in some hours
as a bandage on a wound
given to me as a survivor of the madness
of these Khmers who - with or without diplomas - left the Sorbonne
of these Khmers who had devoured books on the French Revolution
and on this summer day of '79
the France of Giscard... the accordionist
mister "good bye"
had accorded me the status
of political refugee
as one administers vaccines
against the French colonial illness
I had to say inwardly
[...]
with irony that makes fun of irony
"Good bye Vietnam, all time enemy
good morning France, sunny days enemy!" (*ennemie de beaux jours*)

Ucoc repeats for us that Indochina has been connected to France for a long time, through persons and historical events. He was about to learn the language of the colonisers of his land in the city where Pol Pot and Ho Chi Min went to La Sorbonne. Like many in his situation, he in fact says: "I'm here because you came to us."²⁸⁴ Through writing the

²⁸⁴ I found a similar attitude amongst second-generation British South Asians in London in 1999 (See Fagerlid 2001). This is exemplified in the lyrics by the British Asian band Asian Dub Foundation: "The gold that you stole/The pillage and the plunder/Is it any wonder that we're here? [...] We're only here cause

history of France into his own, or the other way around – his own history into that of France, as I will show in the last example of Souleymane Diamanka – Ucoc weaves the small and the large, the local and the distant histories together.

Souleymane Diamanka and the deleuzian “minor” language

While Ucoc is concerned about his experiences of the particular journey out of a war zone and the entry to France, Souleymane reflects on the journey of his nomadic ancestors and what becomes of their poetic griot or storyteller tradition in a foreign land and language. Much of his poetry reflects – and reflects *on* – the changing circumstances of this specific lyricism of the West African griots.

It’s primitive art and it’s annoying
I’m nothing but a poor griot sitting by the foot of a concrete baobab
I dream of Africa like an adopted child dream of his real parents
I’ve grown up here and it’s not always cool (*marrant*)

The story Souleymane tells in many interviews²⁸⁵ about his artistic heritage is symbolically instructive in its duality. On the one hand, his French schoolteacher who awakened his interest in poetry in his early teens. “Poetry is to tie knots in sentences for the reader or listener to untie,” he had taught his pupils, and Souleymane started to improvise poetic stories. At home, on the other hand, they spoke only Fulani. In order for us to respect our parents as full human beings, not as solely capable of expressing themselves in bad French, he tells. His father wanted his children to have the same education in the French suburb as they would have received back home in the village, but he was busy working in the Ford factory. Therefore, he filled tapes with genealogies,

you were there/Consequence of your global pillage/Yeah, here in England/A global village (‘Debris’ from Facts and Fiction, Asian Dub Foundation 1995).

²⁸⁵ E.g. here <http://www.afrik.com/article13423.html> These are some of the other sources for the section on Souleymane Diamanka (all accessed 25.12.2011).
<http://www.afrik.com/article13005.html>
<http://archives.gip-epra.fr/emission/souleymane-diamanka-le-meilleur-ami-des-mots-1-2-s3003b-8>
<http://www.evene.fr/musique/actualite/interview-souleymane-diamanka-hiver-peul-1013.php>
<http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?article1770>
<http://www.contrepoint.info/?p=269>

stories of village life, how he met their mother, his view on the world, on being human, as well as his voyage from the village to Dakar and all the way to France. It was his father's cassettes that awoke his interest in the griot storyteller tradition and their lyrical expressions, as well as in his family's past.

Souleymane's poetry is so full of assonances and alliterations that my translation is nothing but an insult to his expression. The title song from his album *Fulani Winter*²⁸⁶ starts with the crackling sound from one of his father's cassettes, and his father talking in Fulani. Then comes the deep, sonorous voice of Souleymane, recounting his patrilineal genealogy – as he often starts his performances – pronouncing both the Fulani and the Muslim or West African names with clear diction. It ends with Souleymane speaking in Fulani.

Fulani winter, by Souleymane Diamanka^{xii}

My name is Souleymane Diamanka, called Duajaabi Jeneba
Son of Boubacar Diamanka, called Lanta Lombi
Grandson of Kaakaly Diamanka, called Mamadou Tenen
Great grand son of Demba Diamaka, called Lennegel Yaama etc etc

I was lulled to sleep by the quiet song exercises of my ancestors
And I know that this voice will never silence/be silent
It wishes me to be a worthy heir to this nomadic people
To be Duajaabi Jeneba, the Fulani child
Descendant of Bilaali Sadi Hole, the well-reputed
Haal pulaar, the people of love, to whom the land is a poem
And the flag a mosaic of thousands of proverbs
The Fulani people and their sayings is like the savannah and its tall grass
Like the frozen ocean and its drops of water

²⁸⁶ The title points in two directions: to the nomadic Fulani tradition of coming together in the winter and listen to the elders telling stories to initiate the younger; and to the voyage up north to France his parents made to protect their children from famine.

Like the burning Sahara and its grains of sand
Haal Pulaar migrating people of orators
Of whom Amadou Hampathe Ba was ambassador
We move on to the time of written orality
Which pierces the haze like a moonbeam
The day he wrote with his most beautiful pen
“In Africa, an old person who dies is like a library that burns down”
Gypsy people of Sahel
who were forced to come to the lake of the sedantaries to quench their thirst
some centuries before leaving for an hilly western terrain
In the season of misery, the prisoners liberate themselves

People of shepherds who made speech an art²⁸⁷
Who have less fear of death than of losing honour
A genealogical baobab with its roots in African and its top in Europe
The trunk of these traditions has its strength and weaknesses
And the identity storms hurt its bark

[short intermezzo with his father's voice from the cassettes]
[...]

This chapter in their history could have been called Fulani winter
The walkers from the ancestral western Africa
Face suffering, thirst and coldness all the way to France
To shield their families from the famine
During their sleepless nights
They ask themselves: where are we?
And from the bottom of the ages, the spirits respond in unison
We are far from where we were born
In an urban and hostile bush

²⁸⁷ This paragraph is not included in the cd pamphlet.

Capable of putting up a language barrier
In the heart of the home
Where the words are almost the only heritage the parents pass on
The travellers no longer know where they are and the road risks being long

Their wisdom stays muted²⁸⁸
They observe the people acting
And in the mirror they understand that the people rise when they pass:
It's the face of the stranger it concerns
They look at this unknown earth in nights of nostalgia
As one look at the ocean from a fleet
Wayward somewhere between the port of Dakar and the port of Bordeaux

With eyes closed and hollow cheeks, they remember
They remember the village, the fruits, the smells and all the details
The walk towards the horizon of rice-fields and cattle
They keep in memory the sayings all the way back from Fouladou
[...]

They teach their children that they are princes
That they come from a kingdom of humble wisdom
A people of kings who work the land in the skin of simple people
[...]

They love to say that the soul's nobility dress the wounds
and that it [the nobility] belongs neither to the rich nor poor
[...]

Their ambition is human and they've succeeded with the very hardest,
to see their children grow up in France and become sculptures,
standing adults, in balance on two cultures
[his father's voice from the cassette again]

²⁸⁸ This paragraph is also not included in the CD leaflet, and I am not completely sure if I have the exact phrasing right, but the meaning seems clear: His parents realise to what extent they were strangers when they saw how people reacted to their appearance.

If only I could translate
what my father is about to say
The sentences he pronounces have never known ink
but when he closes his eyes
its into the memory of a whole people he enters
He recites the human encyclopaedia
of a dynasty that his soul knows by heart
whereas it has not yet been written and he speaks to the earth
because only she knows to keep the secrets
Haal pulaar, their metaphors are precious because they are precise
at one and the same time close and far away, like the reflections of a star in a
pond
The farmer has not always clean hands
but the roots of his words bathe in poetry
I've drunk his words until the bottom of his heart
And believe me, the source was immense
My father was a shepherd before he was a worker
He was prince before he was poor
Before this indifferent house in the clearing of the forgotten ones [*clarière des
oubliés*, a play on the name of the housing estate *Clairière des Aubiers*,
“Sapwood Glade”]
he lived in an immense house in Same Kanta in Casamance
And he almost defied death dancing around the fire,
like the smoke from incense,
to glimpse a better future for his wife and his children
In the season of misery, the prisoners liberate themselves
This chapter in my history would have been called Fulani winter

At the end of the song, we hear both his father's voice from the old cassette, then Souleymane speaks Fulani. It seems neither that he repeats the words of his father, nor that he answers him. Probably he just speaks his own words. Finally, he says in French:]

Signed Diamanka Poullo Fouladou

The land of his nomadic ancestors is a poem, he says, and their flag a mosaic of sayings. In many of his texts, Souleymane refuses, and slips out of, simple classifications, as I described in Chapter 8. I have heard or read several interviews with Souleymane where a seemingly well-informed and thoughtful interviewer questions his belonging to France. In a long interview on Radio France International,²⁸⁹ for instance, the knowledgeable and seemingly considerate woman asked him if his father's cassettes had helped him "withstand the shock" in France, even though it was clear that he arrived at the age of two. Moreover it was clear that his father made the cassettes, fearing that his children would be "black only in the skin" because he could not spare time to give them a Fulani education. It was not the other way around, as the questions suggested (that the children had problems finding their ground in France.) The poised and soft-spoken man interrupts and answers her metaphor "shock-in-France": "In France, my feet stay put." Elsewhere, he says he is "100% French and 100% Fulani", with no contradiction. In his poetry, however, he refuses this brute categorisation, as I have shown in earlier chapters.

Souleymane's disinterest in identity categories is shared by many in the milieu. Examples are the white flag in Hocine Ben's poem above and Tô's rejection of "isms" and labels in "The Orphans", quoted in the beginning of this thesis. A line in another of Ucoc's poems carries a sting towards identity labels detrimental to the experience of a shared humanity: "It is the 'Can anybody tell me if it is a Tutsi or a Hutu?' from a journalist in front of a corpse". I interpret this stance against dividing labels as a defence for the "we want to become *humans*" and the "*I am*" from Tô's poem. What are the humans in continuous becoming in slam? Are humans perhaps in transformation as they turn in the direction of their fellow others, both in order to convey their own trajectories and to listen to and understand the trajectory of their neighbours?

²⁸⁹ <http://www.rfi.fr/contenu/20100324-1-souleymane-diamanka> (accessed 01.11.2011)

“I write French in a foreign language”: The becoming universal of difference

Souleymane often speaks Fulani in his poems, and at the end of “Fulani winter” I interpret it to mean that he passes on the language – with its expressions and lyricism – in his own way. His superior handling of the French language and his French home-grown demeanour and attitude, plant him firmly in French soil. As I quoted from his Facebook page in Chapter 8, “I have sublimated the language of Molière without ever offending it. Which politician dares to say that I’m not French?” To this soil however, he proudly introduces the poetic expressions of his nomadic ancestors, as well as reminiscence of their long voyage.

Souleymane’s consistent use of Fulani in his overall French performances can be interpreted as what Deleuze and Guattari call a deterritorialisation of a major language. That means that he transforms the “major language” of French in his own way (2004: 116). Souleymane’s use of the Fulani language including its lyricism and idioms is quite typical of the way many slammers mix and expand their French. Another, and less complex example, is the woman I described in Chapter 6 who always starts her recitals by singing in Russian. Dgiz, who is not bilingual like her or Souleymane, brings the *verlan* – the long-standing tradition of inverting syllables – and argot of popular France, often of Arabic origin, into his poetry and performances. His “Dgizhors” is so full of puns, metaphors and unconventional or unofficial language, that it is beyond my capacities to translate it. However, a few examples are telling, like when he describes himself in terms of the military jargon for a French instrument of torture from the colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria: *C’est vrai qu’j’suis fait de font de haine, Appelle-moi Maître Dgiz de gégène*: “It’s true that I’m made of melting hatred, Call me Master Dgiz of gégène.” A “gégène” is a diminutive of “génératrice” and the military slang term for a portable electric dynamo deployed as an instrument of torture in the war in Indochina and particularly in Algeria.²⁹⁰ The use of – sometimes even mock – Arabic at the streets of Paris in the night (described in the introduction) can also be seen as a

²⁹⁰ <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gegene> (accessed 17.11.2011)

“minor”²⁹¹ and idiosyncratic re-appropriation of the French language as a centralised majority structure. Deleuze and Guattari see the “minorising” as an individual strategy for individual autonomy as well as a way of conquering “the major language in order to delineate in it as yet unknown minor languages” (2004: 116).

Perhaps one can say that these examples, more or less, poetically un-conceal the “minor” languages within the “major” French. While large parts of the French establishment sees the French language as threatened and diminishing, another large part of the population is in fact opening it up for new circumstances and experiences, effacing the colonial gap through bridges of words and trajectories.

By the terms major and minor language Deleuze and Guattari therefore do not mean different languages but different usages or functions of language. In major language, certain “constants are drawn from the variables” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 114), whereas in the minor treatment of language, the variables are under continuous variation (2004: 114). The majoritarian is a constant and homogenous system (with minorities as subsystems), whereas the minoritarian is “a potential, creative and created, becoming” (2004: 117). The difference between the minor and major function and usage of language corresponds to the difference between smooth and striated space described in the introduction: minoritarian usage varies continuously and it constructs a continuum of variables, perhaps as language conforms to experience. The majoritarian, like the hylomorphic (matter-form) model, consists of set standards and variables into which experience must fit. Only minoritarian can be becoming, and in this continuous variation lays creation and autonomy. The French Martinican writer Édouard Glissant developed a relational theory of identity for colonised people based on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming-minor of the major language. Decolonialisation will be done when colonised people no longer conceive of the Western nation as an opposite, he claims, distinguishing himself from earlier political movements like Negritude (Glissant 1997: 17).

²⁹¹ Without going into a lengthy discussion, I would like to remark that I find Deleuze and Guattari’s choice of metaphor slightly awkward. *A Thousand Plateaus* was originally published in French in 1980, when the public discussion on minorities and “second generation” immigrants was still in its wake. Although I find the process of “minorising” a “major” language pertinent and rewarding, their choice of terms seems to me, more than twenty years later, naïve and little helpful. Not only do many designated as “minority” reject it as belittling, it also gives the impression that this process is mainly an activity of people of “minority” background. Mikhail Bakhtin showed a similar process in enunciation, be it by monolingual or multilingual speakers.

When minorising a language, I believe one faces the biopolitical power of categorisation and standardisation, and challenges and changes it from within, not through trying to create a space “outside of power”. Like Foucault said in an interview towards the end of his life: The struggle and target nowadays is “to refuse what we are.” To

liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, in Rabinow 1982)

I believe the fluid slam spaces where people can weave their different poetic and poietic stories together in continuously emerging tapestries can provide a public space of disclosure for new understandings of what it means to be human; universal and different.

To sum up the chapter, I will use the title of a book Souleymane has published with his close friend and fellow poet, John Banzaï, of Polish origin: “I write French in a foreign language” (*J’écris en français dans une langue étrangère*). In the book, and in much collaboration on the stage, the two write poems together, weaving their expressions and experiences together. They poignantly symbolised this in an act where they speak each other’s maternal language simultaneously, thus creating what they call *peulonais* (*peul*, Fulani, and *polonais*, Polish). Many of the poets on the Parisian slam scene tell stories originally foreign to the not-so-universal man, but they do it with a language and an attitude worthy of heirs of Molière. The poems I have quoted in this chapter, contribute to a more inclusive and broader understanding of what France is: That you can be Fulani and French – a Fulani from Bordeaux as Souleymane calls himself when he is forced to answer simplistically – or more precisely an “inhabitant of nowhere, originating from everywhere”.

Slam not only creates a cosmopolitan coexistence through bringing different people under the same roof, as Elijah Anderson describes in the cosmopolitan canopy. In addition, the sharing of experiences creates a moral community where different people help each other inscribing each other’s experiences and stories into reality, as I showed in

Chapter 7, moulding this reality to accommodate or unconceal their continuous variations of the variables of the French language and lives in France today. Sharing poetry, thus going back and forth an affective flow and reflexivity, enhances the cosmopolitan orientation towards the perspective of others, humanising them and exploring the common humanness of the different experiences. Smaller and larger re-appropriations of language, history, places and spaces take place on many arenas in France today. I hope that my micro study can contribute to a better understanding of these processes on the street level: How are they created and how are they experienced? Then we can ask with Ucoc: Can France now be vaccinated against its own colonial disease? Here, I think we can find the answer. In the next and final chapter, I will explore the same process of re-appropriation and minorising, but this time of French history.

Chapter 11 or Epilogue

France and the people without history

In this final chapter, I will return to the role of memory in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in a national community. First, I will recapitulate two perspectives on the past in the present from the theoretical perspectives in Chapter 4. Then, I will define history from an anthropological perspective, which connects meaning on an individual and an inter-subjective, societal level, as well as combining mental schemata with material forces (Wolf [1982] 1997). Next, through a personal account, I explore the ways personal senses and understandings of history interrelate with ways of belonging and notions of community. Finally, I will contrast two ontologies of the human being, with corresponding notions of belonging, relations and societal formations. I will show why the one of interdependence and interconnections practiced and promoted by slam must be more correct than the self-reliant and bounded (Cf. Bateson 1972). I will back my claim on anthropologist Eric Wolf's conceptualisation of Europe as a bundle and outgrowth of her connections and interdependencies throughout the last five hundred years of global expansion.

Social cohesion and the past in the present: *oubli* or removing the “muzzle”

In Chapter 4, I outline two opposite perspectives on how the past shapes the present: President Sarkozy claimed in his inauguration speech that he would “end with the repentance” in order to “give back to the French the pride in being French.” According to Sarkozy, the “repentance” over colonialism “is a form of self-hatred” and it causes

“competition in memories which nourish hatred of others”.²⁹² This is, as I argued, in line with a predominant tradition in French historiography, which sees social cohesion as fragile and easily threatened by memories of atrocities committed by or against specific categories of the indivisible Republic. This understanding of memory as possibly divisive for the national unity goes back to, at least, the pivotal period in the French nation-building project, the Third Republic (1870-1940), and the historian of nationalism Ernest Renan (1823-1892). Renan points out the role of *l’oubli*, “forgetting”, in the process of grafting a nation.

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality; the union of northern France with the Midi was the result of massacres and terror lasting for the best part of a century. (Renan [1882] 1990, brackets in original, my italics)

Politics of memory has played an important role in French state politics for several hundred years. Every regime at least since the 1789 Revolution has constructed certain visions of the past for their own political advantage (Corbin 2006: 255). In Chapter 5, I showed how public monuments and place names are important ingredients in the construction of an official memory and specific conceptualisations of belonging and community. Moreover, the role of much official memory in France has been to construct solidarity and social cohesion – *vivre ensemble* – under an explicitly political panoply.

The other perspective on the role of the past in the present also bears in mind the importance of social cohesion. Their understanding of memory seems however opposite of to that of Renan and Sarkozy. Instead of too much “repentance”, the editors of *La Fracture Coloniale* (“The Colonial Gap”) see the legacy of colonialism as creating

²⁹² This is my translation. The full original quote from the speech can be found in Chapter 4. (Source e.g. here: <http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/010118844-le-discours-de-nicolas-sarkozy> accessed 17.08.2011)

fractures in French society (Blanchard, Blancel and Lemaire 2005). The *oubli* and *déni* – forgetting and denial – only aggravate the situation. They argue that neither the historical situatedness of the universal “man”, nor the inequalities at the heart of the Republic are sufficiently explored and exposed. The shadows of the very specific “universal man” and the *indigène* – the non-included member of the nation (Barkat 2005) not worthy of the rights of the citizen – create perceptions of a “civilisation deficit” among certain categories of the French population. In this thesis, I have shown how people escape “the sheepfold”, “the muzzle”, “trite” and “all-purpose” categories and descriptions. In the public spaces of slam poetry founded on freedom, equal treatment, solidarity and respect, they become dignified, full human beings. Through on the one hand, speech, communication and the creative force of poetry and poesis, and on the other hand, listening and acknowledgment, a space between people with biopolitical potential for creative resistance (Chapter 5) and unconcealment of singularities and new subjectivities is created (Chapter 8). A fundamental aspect in this process of becoming a full human being is the telling of stories of different trajectories (Chapter 7), without renouncing claims to universal humanness and belonging, however a belonging to a France Métissée of mixing and connections (Chapter 10).

Sharing the history

The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas calls on anthropologists to take notice of two distinct ways of looking at the past:

The futures of historical anthropology and the anthropology of history must lie in the inquiries that [...] seek out distinctive indigenous historical narratives and understandings – yet strive also to ground those narratives in the inter-social colonial histories that we share. (Thomas 1996: 276)

²⁹³ I have omitted Thomas’s reference to non-western societies (“avoid imposing Western notions of historical action and causation and”) because I see no real *a priori* distinction between the use of memory in “Western” and “non-Western” societies, as will shortly become clear in my discussion on the roles of memory in the “Western” society France.

The distinctive French way of writing history for a long time has been to keep the history of the nation separate from the history of colonialism and of immigration. Colonialism and immigration were not part of French history proper (Stora 2005; Wieviorka 2006). Following Thomas however, Renan and Sarkozy's national narratives – of *oubli* and *déni* (Blanchard et al 2005) – ought to be grounded in wider inter-social colonial histories, if they are to provide more substantial knowledge than just being examples of “indigenous historical narratives and understandings”. Attacks on the alleged “repentance” and a fear of “competition in memories” leave people – be they with or without connections to distant places – without explanations and background to understand the all-pervasive presence of *La France Métissée*. Instead, different people live and see the world through shattered pieces of different, unconnected bits of history. Following Eric Wolf, I claim that contemporary European states like France and Britain cannot be properly understood until “we learned to visualize them in their mutual interrelationships and interdependencies in time and space” (Wolf 1997: X) with the rest of the world.

I have argued that slam sessions provide a space where people can become familiar with individual stories and accommodate to different perspectives on history. In Chapter 10, I presented various examples of different personal conceptualisations of the past, with corresponding – more or less ambivalent, however engaged – conceptualisations of belonging to a national unity. They all fall within the category of Thomas's “indigenous historical narratives and understandings”. Hocine Ben speaks of the history of postcolonial immigrants and their descendants in the French banlieues and connects their plight to the 2005 riots. Through his poetry he removes a “muzzle”, presumably put on by the same people who did not give his parents senior railway passes (although they were recruited to France to work) and who wrote the history books full of silences. I also believe that as a poet, Ben recreates his belonging through unconcealing a universe with “ifs” and “maybes” and through saying aloud to an audience – thus “inscribing into reality” – the “because” and “whys”.

Poetic ifs and maybes, and truth as something alive and organic are however not the issue of Marie-Françoise's poem presented in the same chapter. In stark realism (she tells me how she googled all the details to get them correct), her poem tells the facts that have received the proper treatment neither in history books nor by justice. Many people

have died – “savagely”, in contrast to the peaceful death of the person responsible for the savagery, as well as to the alleged civilisation of a state of law – without either legal persecution of the perpetrators or an appropriate official acknowledgement of the facts. Marie-Françoise identifies with the Algerians, Jews and communists who died. Through a call for acknowledgement, she integrates their history into the history of Paris and France. Moreover, her call includes an acknowledgement of the crimes of the French chief perpetrator, Maurice Papon. Souleymane Diamanka and Ucoc bring their own stories from afar close to the circle of listeners. Souleymane describes to us how and why his father came to France and the world he left behind. A world Souleymane brings alive through his “written orality” and with the help of his mother tongue and translated Fulani idioms, in his own homeland, France. Ucoc additionally reiterates the already existing connections (of atrocity, thus reasons for his flight) between his country of adoption and his country of birth.

Outline of chapter

In this chapter, I show that it is of individual as well as of societal importance to acknowledge these memories and stories as part of “the inter-social [...] histories that we share”. First, I will retell an account of what the senses of injustice and the lack of official acknowledgement can lead to on a personal level, seen from the perspective of a “third generation” “colonial subject” (as well as “coloniser”). Next, I describe a number of controversies concerning acknowledgement or re-appropriation of historical issues that took place in France during the first six months of my fieldwork. The personal as well as the larger-scale struggles show the relevance and importance of Nicholas Thomas’s call to connect the two layers of historical thinking. By this he means the individual understandings, i.e. the meaning of the past in the present for the individual, as well as working towards an inter-social agreement which makes possible communication and inter-social understanding, thus the basis of societal cohesion, the *vivre ensemble*. The stories from the slam sessions recounted in the previous chapter, and the examples from this chapter, share in many ways Thomas’s aim for the double endeavour of historical anthropology. The slammers and the activists who re-appropriate French history seek to ground their “narratives in the inter-social colonial histories that we share”.

A milestone contribution to writing the anthropological history of interrelationships and interdependencies – the very inter-social history we all share – is Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*, which has recently appeared in a third edition after it was originally published in 1982. I will end the thesis by situating the claims for acknowledgement – inscribing into historical as well as present day reality – taking place in slam as well as in wider society, within Wolf's conceptualisation of what I call a relational Europe. In line with the argument of *Europe and the People without History*, the former European colonial powers cannot be properly understood without being seen in relation to their colonies. Wolf explores the traces of the expansion, the trade connections and the politico-economical development of capitalism historically and globally. In doing so, he rips away the Eurocentric foundation of the entire history of modernity: industrialism and its capitalist foundation. Europe is itself an outgrowth of its own expansion and the political, commercial, demographical and cultural connections and changes thus created. The presence of former colonial subjects in the former colonial metropolises is an obvious example of this connection. Wolf's oeuvre sets out to speak against the kind of *oubli* that has been haunting France. In the same way as Wolf decentres modernity, the struggle over history now taking place in France can be seen as a decentring of France as an idea as well as a politico-economical and territorial entity.

As a contrast to the epistemology of heterogeneity and becoming of the open territory of relational Europe, I present the inward-looking epistemology of *Integral Europe* (Holmes 2000). In his monograph, Douglas R. Holmes draws a picture of a longstanding current of European thought attempting to close Europe and its "cultures" in on themselves. This "Counter Enlightenment" and national romantic intellectual tradition proclaims the essence of human nature to be rooted deep in land and culture, upon which all meaningful forms of community, collectivity and solidarity must be built. The bounded units of identity, community and nation must be protected and preserved pure. Through the contrast between the relational and the "integral" epistemologies, I aim to explore a deep-seated dichotomy, in practice as well as in discourse, that can be found between the opening up – decompartmentalising, relational, heterogeneous, interrelated and becoming – processes of slam space and of La France Métissée. In the latter vein, I interpret the widespread discourse on *insecurité* – fear in public space – with consequent

public practices of protection, isolation and circumscription, or what Hardt and Negri call “erecting invisible walls in a common space” (2009: 255). The attempts at pinning, and even narrowing, down the national identity in a governmental initiated public discourse and even a ministry – which explicitly demarcates itself vis-à-vis immigration²⁹⁴ – seem to me to be part of the same mental schema, on a national level.

The differences between the relational and the inward looking understandings and conceptualisations of self and society are also found in the differences between the epistemologies Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call “smooth” and “striated – metric – space”. The former is a dynamic model of material-forces – processual and in becoming – while in the latter, matter is organised in homogenised, stable forms, like fixed and bounded identities, communities and nation states. At the level of the individual, the dichotomy resonates with Taylor’s (1995) opposition between the modern misconception of personhood as created individually and in isolated monologues in the mind, not in conversation and public spaces of disclosure, as I discussed in Chapter 8. Finally, also in Bateson’s dichotomy between the incorrect epistemology of self-sufficiency, and the more correct one of complementarity, which I discussed in relation to therapy in Chapter 7.

I wish to specify that I here discuss relations and becoming versus closure and fixity at several empirical and theoretical levels. The aim is to show how the slammers discussed in the previous chapters, and the activism of re-appropriation to be described in this, act on the basis of an equivalent epistemology of interrelationships and interdependencies (in time and space) to that which Wolf delineates empirically as well as theoretically in *Europe and the People without History*. Wolf sets forth to describe and explain not only the *mental* schemata of traditions, systems of belief and categorisations, but also the *material* forces bringing about the particular “bundle of relationships” (Wolf 1997: 3) that we today call Europe. Holmes on the other hand does not go beyond the description and contextualisation of politico-philosophical tradition and worldview of politicians. Thus, he does not attempt to establish the truth-value of their epistemology, which is, as I understand it, the ultimate aim of Wolf’s emphasis on explanations. In a

²⁹⁴ The Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Codevelopment of France and the discourse on national identity were core themes in the presidential campaign of Nicholas Sarkozy and were set up after his victory, thus after the end of my fieldwork.

sense, I suggest that Holmes and my ethnographies spring from the same empirical reality of a Europe in quest of its “soul” (or true ontology); either as “integral”, turned inwards and built on essence, or as relational, open and becoming. While Holmes and I explore people’s mental schemata, however, Wolf takes one step back and explains the forces and processes involved in forming them.

Connections are a fundamental aspect of Wolf’s description as well as explanation: He describes societies within larger historic, geographical and politico-economic contexts (1997: X, 76). The world must according to Wolf, be understood as “a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes” (2004: 3). In the first paragraph of the book, he attacks notions like “nation”, “society” and “culture” because they bring about untenable ideas of boundedness and reification. “‘Societies’ emerge as changing alignments of social groups, segments, and classes, without either fixed boundaries or stable internal constitutions” (Wolf 1997: 387). If we do not understand such notions as “bundles of relationships” and place them back in the field from which they are abstracted, we risk drawing the wrong conclusions – of isolation and self-sufficiency – about what constitutes human beings and their societies. As I understand him, this is what he means when he underlines that we, anthropologists and social scientists, must “connect the connections in theory as well as in empirical study” (1997: 19): We must be able to understand and explain the connections theoretically, and we must include the connections in the empirical investigation. In the previous chapter, I attempted to show the interconnections making up France as bundles of relationships from the perspective of four of her citizens. I believe that the bundles, the interdependencies, and heterogeneity constitute the very essence of belonging and foundation of community in many senses for many people.

The story of Louis

I will now present a story of the anger and frustration felt by a young man over what he perceives as historical injustices committed against his family by the French state. When we meet in May 2006, six months after the riots, Louis is enraged by the ongoing *crise*, “crisis” – a widespread term in French society. In Louis’s opinion, *la crise* mostly concerns what I have called “the colonial gap” and the inertia or apathy on part of the

ruling elites to do something about it. This personal account exemplifies the lines of exclusion created by injustice and discrimination, their personal consequences as well as an individual's understandings and feelings of the issues.

I met Louis²⁹⁵ completely by chance. We were both on our own, sitting next to each other on the railings on Pont Neuf watching *Sidaction*, a huge musical parade in support of the AIDS cause, when we started talking. I had quickly perceived him as a stereotypical *jeune de banlieue*, as I noticed his hoodie, sagging jeans, pale, lean face, shaven head and stooping posture – obviously intensified by a high intake of cannabis or alcohol or both. Therefore, when we spoke, his argotic language, almost incomprehensible to my academically trained ear, did not come as a surprise. His story however, and the complexity behind his stereotypical looks did. Louis had only a vague idea of my research when he told me his story. He did not know the specificities of it hit the bull's eye of my project. I find the coincidental character of this meeting significant. It probably means there are many of his kind around in France, sharing his origins, feelings and frustrations: Young as well as older people with arch-French names and pale and whitish skin, being fundamentally at unease with the official handling of small and large, personal and official, issues in French history.

Louis is 25 years old and appears to be in a difficult period of his life. He has recently broke up with his girlfriend, and when I meet him he seems to be getting drunk and smoking large amounts of cannabis almost every day. He has been unemployed for several months, has quit his studies twice – first sociology at university, then management at a private school – as well as various odd jobs.²⁹⁶ As is common in France, his parents (his father, he says) pay for his education and livelihood. He wants to pay him back even though his father probably does not see it as a loan. His father had encouraged him to study management. Louis explains that when he realised what he would become after finishing a degree in management, he quit. He does not want to work, study, or participate in society, he says. Nevertheless, if he absolutely must do something, he wants to work with music or sound engineering, or at least get up on a stage and give voice to

²⁹⁵ It is no coincidence that Louis's pseudonym has this classical French royal ring to it, as I will come to shortly.

²⁹⁶ During the two months I stayed in contact with Louis, he reunites with his girlfriend and starts working in some kind of municipal labour market initiative, doing gardening in public parks with a hotchpotch of other young men, predominantly former convicts and recent immigrants.

his frustration. He has tried that once, in a small bar in Rue Oberkampf, and he absolutely loved screaming out his rage. The texts he shows me are dark and angry. An acquaintance of his, whom I often continue talking to when Louis is getting so drunk that he just nods off in a corner, hesitates to say that he likes them because of their bitter character.

Louis's acquaintance,²⁹⁷ Henri, is a black man a year or two younger, with parents from two West-African countries, who has grown up in a deprived suburb – where the “streets have names after trees, or “under the trees” – *sous-bois* – but where there isn't a tree in sight,” as he once comments. Like Louis, he is far from satisfied with the state of affairs in France, but he does not share Louis's moods and outlook. He is a talented musician, knowledgeable in most subjects from 19th century French poetry to Norwegian sports, and a student at a prestigious Parisian university.²⁹⁸ Henri and Louis are strikingly different in some respects: one is subject to racism, the other is not (necessarily), and one is energetic and full of initiative, the other lethargic. The brief point I want to make in comparing the two is that one is certainly not predetermined to make a mess of one's life, as Louis seems to have done.

Louis says agitatedly that he does not care much about politics, and continues to talk about *la crise* and says that it is too bad the situation in the *banlieues* had to reach the point of three weeks of riots. Moreover he adds, how dare Sarkozy go to Africa,²⁹⁹ considering the amount of weapons France sells to that continent. For a person who does not care about politics (Cf. Bertho 2009), he is quite well informed and becomes very emotional, I think to myself, and notice the same passion and involvement in later conversations on the same subjects. Louis continues his diatribe; the day in

²⁹⁷ They part ways shortly after I lose contact with Louis. According to Henri, Louis threatened him physically because he had talked too much with his girlfriend (whom he had reunited with at the time).

²⁹⁸ Before he was inscribed in college, Henri's ambitious mother changed his address of residence to that of an uncle's, so he could go to a very prestigious *Lycée* and continue to this university. There he studied literature and teaching, but he quit after a few years to study music instead. His name reflects the ambitions and traditions of his mother; his two first names are one classical and common European (with an equivalent ring to “Henri”) and one of a famous European artist not in much use nowadays, while his surname is African.

²⁹⁹ In May 2006, Interior Minister Sarkozy went to Benin and Mali to promote his policies towards Africa. The tour was much debated, partly because it took place at the same time as the Interior Minister was trying to implement a new immigration policy *immigration choisie, pas subie*, where the main objective was to choose well-qualified immigrants that France needed, not the ones that just happened to come. In Benin he was met by demonstrations, French media reported.

commemoration of slavery³⁰⁰ is fine, but it is just not enough! In addition, yes, it has gotten a little bit better on television after the riots, with more non-white people on the screen, but it is just *normal* that society is represented, and besides, it makes very little difference!

Louis tells me he comes from a banlieue in the 94 department (where 40% of the children are enrolled in a *zone d'éducation prioritaire* school), but his parents moved him from the local school to a private one³⁰¹ in his mid teens for him to have a better education. He disliked the change, as he found several of his new teachers to be overtly racist. He had always had friends of different backgrounds, he explained, and he reacted strongly when he sensed the racism from the teachers. The old school was very mixed, while there were only a handful of non-white children in the private one.

Louis actually blames the French state for what he sees as his father's – and consequently his own – problems. He tells me that in 1980 – a year before his first and only child was born – his father changed his Arab name to a very common traditional French name, starting with “Du...”. His father only cares about business, he says with disdain, and an Arab name is bad for business because of all the racism. Louis explains that to him the act of changing one's family name is disrespectful to the forefathers. He says he would have liked to have an Arab surname together with the so typically French and traditional “Louis”. Father and son have never talked about their Arab origins. Louis's mother told him the story of his father's past when he was seventeen.

The story goes something like this: His paternal grandfather – an Egyptian work migrant in the then French protectorate Morocco³⁰² – had finally had enough of his racist French colonial boss and hit him. In response to the revolt, he was given the choice between twenty years in prison or joining the French Army. He chose the latter, was sent to the war in Indochina, got malaria and died a while afterwards. His wife, Louis's grandmother – of French decent – committed suicide after this. Louis's father was brought up by his old, strictly Catholic grandparents in the south of France. The strict upbringing has made him very *enfermé sur soi-même* (“closed”), Louis explains, and tells

³⁰⁰ In 2006, it was the first time that the 10th of May was acknowledged as the official day for the commemoration of slavery as crime against humanity.

³⁰¹ About two out of 11,5 million children receive private education in France.

³⁰² His mother lived in the former colonies too. He has been back to both countries in question with his parents.

me that he struggles with being introverted himself. It is apparently attempting to open up and overcome this tendency, he talks to strangers and readily invite me for dinner. He seems close to and distant from his father at the same time, on the one hand telling me how he asks him along to concerts and, on the other, how they shake hands formally when they meet (a greeting that strongly signals formality in France, as most men and women greet each other by kissing the cheeks). Louis moved away from home when he was seventeen and, according to him, kept partying all week long the final year at Lycée. He had no ambition of succeeding the final Baccalaureate exams, but passed by the skin of his teeth.

After he learnt about his granddad's destiny, Louis tells me he has written several times to French authorities to find out the truth about his fate from the French Army. One of the reasons for inquiring, he says, was to show the findings to his father. "I can write correctly if I want," he adds, underlining that he masters other kinds of styles than the text message language, argot, and *verlan* he usually employs. The only answer he received, after months of waiting, said that the army or state does not give away information from cases which are older (or newer?) than a specific number of years, a reply which to him meant that they had not even read his carefully written letter, as his grandfather's case was namely clearly within the time limit. In the reply, the war in question was obviously confused with another colonial war.

Louis exhibits a strange mix between carefulness and nonchalance, of middleclass neatness – he tells me things like where I can get the cheapest food without renouncing on quality – and rebellious anger. His flat (owned and paid for by his father and "probably he wants to let it again...") seems always to be tidy and clean. I notice how his shelves in the kitchen are in perfect order and the bench is spotless as he wipes it while preparing dinner: Brown basmati rice perfectly cooked with a homemade vegetable sauce, grated carrots and fresh juice. Evidently nutritious food put carefully together. Most of the furniture comes from Muji, the quite highbrow "no-logo" and recycling conscious Japanese minimalist design retailer. In the small, clean and tidy bathroom there is a Muji catalogue. His looming alcoholism and inertia (from too much cannabis?), extensive use of *verlan* and argot, and "youth from the suburb" style, is a strange mix with the spotlessness of his household.

What is in an “ethnicity”?

When getting to know Louis, what struck me was the historical complexity that can be hidden behind an appearance. Like many of the *jeunes de banlieue*, ethnic background is hard to determine. With his brown eyes and pale skin, he could as easily pass for a “100% *Arabe*,” as Dgiz sometimes describes himself, as someone with 100% European decent. In terms of class, he is fluent in the popular styles of argot and verlan, but he can also dress, write and probably speak differently.³⁰³ He has resources from his class background, private schooling and *Bac* to succeed in professional life. When I first saw his flat, I thought it was quite small, but after seeing the conditions in which many of the slammers – even far older – live, his flat looked more like a smart place for a young professional than an unemployed and impoverished student’s flat. The contrast is sharp to all those who hardly would be able to speak and write differently – and who carry more ingrained marks of poverty and negligence, like bad teeth, which seems quite common in France. Louis’s story showed me that behind the whitest French face, there could be a history of foreign, colonised – *as well as* coloniser, as his mother and her family lived in the colonies as well – descent. Moreover, unlike his father, Louis seemed to want to be proud of his whole background. It is almost as if he consciously reverses his father’s erasure of Arab traits in his past. Louis is even considering taking back the Arab family name, which he says would go very well with his royal French first name.

His way of dressing, shaving his head, speaking and posing his body are all stereotypically connected to the *jeune de banlieue* category. This category is strongly ethnically marked, perhaps as *Arabe* but more likely as “non-white” or perhaps even more precisely formerly colonised non-whites in general. Once, in a brief encounter where we helped a youth dressed like Louis, but of undoubtedly Arab origin, with road indications, I was struck by how heartily and smiling they greeted each other, a conviviality I was not used to see among strangers in the French capital. This was before I had walked the streets of Northeast Paris with Dgiz, but I had already started to notice which demeanours caused hostility and solidarity among various other city dwellers. It struck me that the *jeune de banlieue* looks – like the mock or real Arabic I described in

³⁰³ While Dgiz said on many occasions that he wrote as he spoke (and was not particularly proud of it, but saw the benefits of being more on an equal footing with disadvantaged youth in the workshops).

the ethnographic introduction in Chapter 2 as a kind of *lingua franca* used to slide gracefully out of (perceived) trouble – could be interpreted as a new subaltern, postcolonial style, showing which side you are on in the urban landscape. Alternatively, as Antonio Negri put it: which side of the diagonal of biopolitical oppression or creative resistance you place yourself (Negri et al. 2008).

Subaltern or becoming minoritarian?

When I asked Louis (right after this friendly meeting with the stranger) if he tried to pass for an “Arab”, he found my question ridiculous and said he did not “give a fuck about being an Arab or white or whatever!” I did not really believe him at that time, but in hindsight, I do. He is utterly content with his arch-French first name, and he consistently appeared to be nothing but proud of his orderly, wholesome and gentleman-like manners, presumably from his middleclass upbringing. Louis could dress up in an ironed shirt for dinner, and made a point out of protecting and treating women with reverence and respect, no matter how drunk he was (opening doors and being attentive when crossing the street, making sure I would get home safely at night etc.).³⁰⁴ At the same time as Louis refuses many of the privileges³⁰⁵ of his class background as well as those of ethnicity. He quit management school to avoid becoming like his father, and he dresses and speaks in a way that attracts scornful looks and overt disrespect in much of French society.³⁰⁶ Nevertheless, he makes no effort, quite the contrary, of forsaking other parts of his class habitus. Instead of arguing that Louis tries to pass simply as an “Arab”, I revise my initial interpretation of the *jeune de banlieue* as a “subaltern” outside of hegemonic power structures and with limited agency and ability to speak and be heard (see Chapter

³⁰⁴ Even if the case might be that Louis acted with a considerable amount of courtesy “just” in order to try to chat up the female anthropologist, it does not change the fact that the middleclass gentleman was ingrained in his body, no matter how drunk or stoned he was. The intersection of class and masculinity was extremely noticeable in most of the French men I encountered. This aspect of courtesy and *savoir-vivre* was something Dgiz tried to learn, but many times it became obvious that it was not yet ingrained in his habitus, rather something he had to try to teach himself repeatedly, often by commenting upon his own actions.

³⁰⁵ In this sense he resembles David Graeber’s description of the “downwardly mobile elements of the professional classes” turning to political activism or, in the case of some slammers of middleclass background as well as Louis, to creative self-expression, in response to an alienation from their own class position (Graeber 2009: 252-256).

³⁰⁶ Apparently, he is also stopped and searched by the police. He mentioned matter-of-factly once when we met outside that he used to hide his hash in a pair of briefs under large boxer shorts, under baggy jeans, where the police would not find it.

4). Instead, I suggest that “White” Louis, like “Black” Souleymane Diamanka and “Arab” Dgiz, searches for something similar to the autonomy and creation of the “becoming-minoritarian” of Deleuze and Guattari (2004). To what extent Louis succeeds to the same extent as the two others, depends on what he does with the “minority elements”.

“Minorities,” Deleuze and Guattari write, must be “thought of as seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorialization of the mean or majority” (2004: 117). “Majority” on the other hand, consists of constants, like striated space, and is fixed and not in becoming. I interpret the seeds of becoming triggering uncontrollable movements to be like the swerve of the clinamen, with the ability to connect without reducing either the heterogeneity or possibilities for further becoming. “Majority” thus stays put and has not this inherent capacity for connection and development. Perhaps it was the “threshold of the majoritarian standards” Louis’s father experienced, when he concluded that an Arab name was bad for business. The *Arabe* or *jeune de banlieue*-ness in Louis’s demeanour can thus be interpreted as attempts at “deterritorialising” the “mean, majoritarian” Frenchness his father strives for, and combining it with “minoritarian” elements. The figure of minoritarian consciousness leads to becoming, as it is creation, and of autonomy, as it does not consist of constants. It “is continuous variation, as an amplitude that continually oversteps the representative threshold of the majoritarian standard, by excess or default” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 117-118).

In the previous chapter, I argued that Souleymane and Dgiz achieved autonomy and becoming – from “trite” and static categories – through their creation and continuous variation of language and expressions. Louis, on the other hand if he is not careful, might be stuck, not only in his life, but also in his attempts to achieve this autonomy of becoming – in his case “French” with an “Arab” background, perhaps. This is a possibility if he seeks rebellion only in the fixed category of the *jeune de banlieue*, rather than “connecting” and “conjugating” elements from that category with elements from his middleclass background.

It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 118)

At the time I lost contact with Louis, he seemed not yet to have found a way out of the impasse and personal crisis he seemed to find himself in. I heard Louis's story before I knew what slam was, and I did not really understand why he had felt so good about his one-off appearance of screaming his anger in front of a listening and applauding – slam, as it turned out to be – audience at Plex Y Glass in Rue Oberkampf. When I view it in hindsight, however, I think Louis could have found a solution through finding listeners and acknowledgement for his therapeutic and creative writing at the slam scene. The state did not listen and acknowledge, but the slam audience does. The open space of the slam session, as Nada said in his text quoted in Chapter 7, continuously inspires to produce new, fresh texts for new, fresh opportunities. This dynamics makes an autonomous and heterogeneous continuous becoming possible.

Power and categorisation

What happens when the official version of history does not correspond to what people know to be true, as in Louis's case? The inter-relationship between personal history and the official history of a nation becomes apparent. When Louis tells me how he has carefully prepared letters to the French state, he indicates that an official acknowledgement of his plea and of what happened would have healed at least some of the wounds he sees as inflicted upon his family. The official version of history has until very recently gone against the grain of many formerly colonised peoples' own understanding of the historical events. The phrase *nos ancêtres les Gaulois* ("our ancestors, the Gaul...") – now a standing joke, but until recently taught in schools all over France and its colonies – is just the most caricatured example that something is peculiar about the official version of history. The memory of slavery is far from eradicated in the oral history of the *Antillais*, neither are the atrocities and injustices in French Algeria, nor

in the metropolis itself. In the rest of this chapter, I will ascend to a bird eye's view on the struggle over French official history.

In the French case, it is striking that not only the atrocities against certain categories of the population have been hidden. The Colonial gap consists also of ignoring and hiding contributions and heroic deeds by the same categories of “non-included members of the nation” (Barkat 2005). The lack of acknowledgement and recognition for their participation in the fight for freedom and the building of a nation are aspects of the discrimination the population from the former colonies still are subjected to (Fagerlid 2001). People's sense of belonging is affected by being invisible in history books and the historical memory of their country (Cf. Hocine Ben and Marie-Françoise's poems in the previous chapter). The injustice of these silences goes against the grain of the founding values of the Republic; the result is that the “equality” it promises remains far from its universal aspirations. People thus engage in a re-appropriation and widening of the history of France. Citing Nicholas Thomas, one could say that they take the “inter-social colonial histories that we share” as their point of departure and demand that the history of France acknowledge their experiences. It is important to notice that there is a universalist and republican aspect to much of this re-appropriation. For instance, the role the slaves themselves played – e.g. through the Haitian Revolution (Dubois 2000, Buck-Morris 2000, Fischer 2004) – in the abolition of slavery, while people in the metropolis doubted their ability to be free and equal. Similarly, I have argued that the heterogeneous, democratic and egalitarian slam space is more republican than the Republic itself.

In his search for an explanation (not just description), Wolf's object of inquiry is relations of power. He finds the explanations of social phenomena in “the articulation of particular domains in which the material and the mental intersect” (1997: XIV). The social categorisation processes can be studied as such domains. Power connected to meaning in the Foucauldian (and Nietzschean) sense plays an important role here.

Ability to bestow meaning – to name “things”, acts, and ideas – is a source of power. Control of communication allows the managers of ideology to lay down the categories through which reality is to be perceived. Conversely, this entails the

ability to deny the existence of alternative categories [...] to render them socially and symbolically invisible. (Wolf 1997: 388)

The ability to bestow meanings is thus a significant source of power. As the meanings generated are never stable, power is required to keep the particular signification in place (1997: 388). Slammers, when they say things that were not possible to say, inscribe it into reality. Their poietic master keys unconceal – behind trite all-purpose categories – an unidentifiable, unclassifiable full human dignity and shared moments of humanity. Slammers thus participate in the power struggle of bestowing meaning.

The creation and continuous recreation of social categories, such as gender, classes, ethnicities and racial designations must therefore be seen as a combination of material and mental or ideological processes and relations. In *Europe and the People Without History* Wolf mostly focused on material processes and how they were connected to the development of global capitalism as a specific structural mode of power (Cf. Wolf 1994). In this thesis, I have tried to look at the struggle over the cosmological orders – human ontology and the nature of relations, belonging and community – that are built up and maintained. In the next section, I will give examples of alternative schemata on a wider scale than the Northeast Parisian slam sessions.

The struggles over history in France can be viewed as a struggle over the mental schemata. The official French history has been full of the nationalist *l'oubli*: Who built the Republic? Who fought for the Republic? The same is the case with the trite categorisation – and consequent dehumanising and undignified treatment – of the population as slaves, *indigènes* and *jeunes de banlieue*. Individuals, collectives and groups have fought against the French state in these cases, making France truer to its republican ideals of freedom, equality, solidarity and respect.

Polémiques over French history 2005-06, an overview

The last years, controversies over colonial history have erupted on a regular basis in the French public debate (e.g. Beriss 2004; Dubois 2000; Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson 2008). During my first ten months of fieldwork in Paris from October 2005 to August 2006, several major historical issues connected with the French colonial past created

widespread *polémiques* (polemics/discussion). Here, I will argue that the *polémiques* can be seen as an attempt at a postcolonial re-appropriation of French history where the official schemata are being contested and attempted replaced.

La loi de 23 Février 2005

Just a few days after my arrival at the end of September 2005, I noticed a debate that had made headlines for months already, and the *polémique* was to increase in the following months. A law paragraph, article 4 of the law of the 23 February 2005, created the turbulence. It obliged the school curriculum to teach the “positive role” of the French colonial presence overseas. Diplomatic relations between France and its former department Algeria had been problematic for several years; now President Bouteflika used the law for what it was worth to adopt an even chillier rhetoric against France.³⁰⁷

The debate about the law reached its peak when Interior Minister Sarkozy cancelled his planned visit to the (French) island of Martinique due to a planned demonstration. What probably had a particular influence on his decision was the fact that the statesman and poet Aimé Césaire refused to meet him. The Interior Minister was even more controversial than usual at the time of the planned trip, as it was to take place just after the November riots. In addition to foreign and overseas reactions, the effort of French political groups, and after a while also political parties, contributed to the abrogation of article 4, on 25 January 2006, less than a year after its proclamation (Bertrand 2006). The law from 23 February 2005 is just one of several *lois mémorielles* (“memorial laws”) the French National Assembly has proclaimed, hence explicitly demanding the writing and teaching of history to be normative. In the course of this controversy around history during my fieldwork, 600 historians signed an appeal for *liberté pour l'histoire* – leaving politics out of the historical research.

17 October: *Nuit Noire*

On the 17 October 2005, the pay television channel Canal Plus broadcasted for the second time since the release in June the same year, their original television drama *Nuit*

³⁰⁷ That he, in the heat of the debate, went to France to get medical treatment for an ulcer paradoxically epitomised, for certain discussants, issues of the colonial legacy.

Noire (“Black Night”). The highly successful and acclaimed docudrama described for the first time to a larger audience the massacre that took place in the heart of Paris on the order of Police Chief Maurice Papon 44 years earlier, at 17 October, when more than 200 peaceful demonstrators were thrown into the river Seine and murdered by the police.

The October-November 2005 riots

The three-week long riots in suburbs all over France starting after the death of the teenagers in Clichy-sous-Bois on the 27 October 2005 evoked colonial history in its own way. On 8 November, Prime Minister de Villepin declared a state of emergency in France, an instrument of repression enabling local mayors to introduce curfew and a ban on crowds. The state of emergency law dates from 1955, the time of the colonial war in Algeria. The times and places of its implementation carry a heavy symbolic burden:³⁰⁸ In Algeria during the war and against Algerian Muslims in the Paris region in the bloody and sombre October 1961. Thus, the symbolism of declaring a state of emergency (again) against youth of which a majority had immigrant background, often from former colonies, was a recurrent theme in most media.

The far left-wing radical organisation *Indigènes de la République*³⁰⁹ interpreted the implementation of the state of emergency as a continuation of colonial governance over the post-colonial immigrants in France. The organisation had fronted this view since its creation in the spring of 2005, thus long before the riots and their repression gave them grain for their mill. Most commentators and analysts do not share the full brunt of the *Indigènes*’s point of view; however, all major newspapers and the rest of the media commented on the sombre memories in French history that the state of emergency called to mind.

La Fracture Coloniale: Une crise française

³⁰⁸ The third time it was declared, was in 1984 in New Caledonia, another French overseas territory, a fact emphasising the colonial legacy of this law.

³⁰⁹ The name of the association plays on the juridical status Muslims had in French Algeria until the end of the Second World War – and in practice until decolonisation – where they, unlike Christians and Jews did not enjoy the rights of full citizenship but were confined to the category of *indigènes*, “locals”. *Indigène* is the same term as Barkat describes as a body of exception, a non-included member of the nation (Barkat 2005).

The November riots coincided with the publication of the anthology *La Fracture Coloniale: Une crise française* (Blanchard et al. 2005), which looked at present day France from a postcolonial perspective. The volume created widespread *polémique* where for instance the radio channel *France Culture* devoted a whole week to the French postcolonial condition. Although Anglophone studies of French society has used the term “postcolonial” for almost twenty years, the term has hardly been used in France – a peculiar situation discussed in the introduction to the book. It questions the long eclipse of aspects of colonial history and institutionalised forgetfulness (*l’oubli institutionalise*, 2005: 15).

Austerlitz Bicentenary and Laïcité Centenary

December arrived with two major celebrations, the 200-year anniversary of Napoleon’s victory in the battle of Austerlitz and the 100-year anniversary of the law of secularism (*laïcité*, the separation of church and state). Since both Napoleon and *La Laïcité* were steeped in controversy at the time – Napoleon for reintroducing slavery a few years after it was abolished in 1794 by the 1789 Revolution and *la laïcité* in relation to the 2004 ban of headscarves in public schools – both celebrations went rather muted. The fact that the anniversaries took place just a few weeks after the end of the riots, may also have contributed to the subdued and self-conscious or even -critical manner in which they were treated by politicians and media alike. Neither Prime Minister de Villepin nor President Chirac participated in the celebration, despite the fact that the former had even written a book on the deeds of Napoleon on the battlefield. The absence of prominent members of the (Gaullist) ruling party at the celebration made a newspaper comment that Bonapartism is no longer Gaullism.

Must one be ashamed of being French? (Faut-il avoir honte d’être Français?)

This self-consciousness concerning French history invigorated a segment of French public life predominantly situated from the right to the far right of the political spectrum. These voices claimed that the self-flagellation – or “repentance” – over crimes of the past

had gone much too far. Soon one would have to excuse oneself for being French.³¹⁰ Prime Minister de Villepin, and later also President Chirac, tried to bridge the gap between the associations and individuals asking for more self-critique and the ones with the contrary view, by saying that “a great nation like France” must assume her whole history, her glorious as well as her less glorious sides.³¹¹

Indigènes – Days of Glory

At the Cannes film festival in May 2006, the four male protagonists in “Days of Glory” (*Indigènes* in French), a film by Rachid Bouchareb on the forgotten soldiers from the colonies who fought for France during the Second World War, won the prize for best male actor. The film and the issue itself received widespread coverage during the festival, and even more so when it was screened nationally in October the same year. President Chirac decided to “defreeze” the pensions of the war veterans, which had not increased since 1959 as an official French revenge for the decolonisation.

Integral Europe versus relational Europe

The epistemology of integral Europe

In *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofacism*, Douglas R. Holmes describes a longstanding current in European thought where “cultural differences” are seen as absolute and incommensurable (Holmes 2000: 6-7, 73). I will argue that this integralist perspective on Europe is almost a mirror opposite of the relational perspective of the re-appropriation of history presented in this chapter. Although springing from the same sources of estrangement and fractures, one alternative affirms difference and relations as ingrained in the essence of persons and communities and the solidarity holding them together. The other purges both difference and relations.

³¹⁰ One example of this came in the centre-left weekly journal *L'Express*, which asked the question on its front-page in mid September 2006: “Faut-il avoir honte d’être Français?”

³¹¹ I read Sarkozy’s insistence in his inauguration speech as president, that he will “finish with repentance” as a retort to the stance of his predecessor of “assuming the whole history”.

Holmes builds his argument on the work of Isaiah Berlin, who describes the “Counter Enlightenment” tradition in European thought as³¹²

[a]ggressive nationalism, self-identification with the interests of class, the culture or the race, or the forces of progress – with the wave of a future-directed dynamism of history, something that at once explains and justifies acts which might be abhorred or despised if committed from calculation of selfish advantage or some other mundane motive – this family of political and moral conceptions is so many expressions of a doctrine of self-realization based on *defiant rejection of the central theses of the Enlightenment*, according to which *what is true, or right, or good, or beautiful, can be shown to be valid for all men by the correct application of objective methods of discovery and interpretation*, open to anyone to use and verify. In its full romantic guise, this attitude is an open declaration of war upon the very heart of the rational and experimental which Descartes and Galileo had inaugurated. (Berlin 1979: 18-19 quoted in Holmes 2000: 203, my emphasis)

As I understand it, slam carries forward the tradition of Enlightenment thought when it proclaims – in explication, poetry and practice – that what is true, right, good and beautiful are accessible to all. Poetry conveying these “human significances” (Taylor 1995) in slam is created with the simple standards of common denominators – of rhythmicity and an everyday character of language and content, as Damien and Tô said (Chapter 8). Nevertheless, unlike Republicanism, slam does not expel difference beyond the borders of civilisation, citizenship and the Republic. Slam incorporates it (Chapter 10).

Holmes also quotes Eric Wolf who traces the anthropological concept of culture to the same Counter Enlightenment tradition of thought. Political multiculturalism (and Islamism) is therefore built on the same principles of cultural difference and incommensurability. Holmes’s book is amazingly pertinent in its descriptions, 11 years

³¹² I include Holmes’s quote from Berlin at length because the text is amazingly clear-sighted concerning anti-immigration and -Islam rhetoric in Europe today, even taking into account the explanation and justification for abhorrent acts.

after its publication. Much of Le Pen's rhetoric has now become even more widespread, with e.g. cultural explanations for the 2005 riots (Islam, polygamy). Another example is the creation of the "The Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development of France", whose aim is "to be both firm and human" in their pursuance of the four objectives of "controlling migration flows", "encouraging development partnerships", "favouring integration" and "promoting our identity".³¹³

Holmes claims that populist leaders like Jean-Marie Le Pen in *Front National* in France and John Tyndall in the British Nationalist Party have discovered and utilised ruptures to experiences of belonging, springing from cultural, rather than socioeconomic, alienation and estrangement (Holmes 2000: 5). The economic crisis has not brought about an upsurge of the national romantic bounded view of identity and community as essentially rooted in land and culture. As Wolf claims, the material and the mental intersect in the articulation of particular domains (1997: XIV), and we need to investigate the mental schemata as well to understand the rise of "Integral Europe". The alienation from traditional politics and the estrangement from traditional class-centred bases of belonging that Holmes describes are reminiscent of the ethnography of Alain Bertho. Bertho claims that politicians and other public commentators mute large parts of the population by interpreting their grievances in their own elitist language, far from the experiences of the people concerned (2009). I have claimed that similar processes of estrangement from traditional party politics and alienation from and repudiation of class categories are prevalent in Parisian slam as well. In slam, however, more direct forms of voice and action have largely replaced the traditional channels of political representation. The estrangement that the colonial and other social gaps have caused, has been replaced and remedied by relations of solidarity and belonging to wider conceptions of France, like *France, terre d'accueil* ("land of welcome or refuge"), or *la France Métissée*.

Holmes links the increasing estrangement to the combination of the technocratic management of the European Union and the ruptures caused by what he calls "fast-

³¹³ (Source: http://www.immigration.gouv.fr/spip.php?page=dossiers_det_org&numrubrique=311&numarticle=1331 accessed 11.10.2011, when I rechecked 18.01.2012, I discovered that the Ministry is dissolved and turned into a Secretariat for Immigration, Integration, Asylum and Development in solidarity, accessed 18.01.2012).

capitalism". The attempt at conscious construction of community of the EU originates, according to Holmes (2000: 15, building on Gérard Noiriel 1996), in Durkheim's confrontation in the 20th century with integralist conceptions of "mechanical solidarity" subordinating the individual to family, "ethnic group", locality and heredity. Instead, Durkheim envisioned an emancipatory "organic solidarity" of the future, building on institutions like schools for transmission of values and knowledge, law for implementing justice, and the welfare state for protection. State and welfare institutions would thus free the individuals from personal dependencies (Holmes 2000: 15-16).³¹⁴

According to Holmes, Le Pen argues that alienation and a need for an "authenticity of experience" of the public are not taken seriously by the elite political discourse. Instead, Le Pen proposes "inner truth" and "direct experience" (Holmes 2000: 72-3). "Civil society, as an enduring framework mediating between the individual and collectivity, is bypassed," Holmes (2000: 72) comments on the political discourse of Le Pen. Le Pen offers the voters

an alternative "socialism," denuded of technocratic pretensions, that derives a social justice form the "reality" and "truth" offered by "tradition," by hierarchy, by the "natural structures" of Europe. (Holmes 2000: 73)

A return to the organic link between identity and territory is supposed to replace technocracy. "Reality" and "truth" spring from the tradition and territory of Europe. Durkheim's organic solidarity is based on division of labour and the distribution of basic needs through institutions. Conversely, "integralist" thought finds the only solution – to the "ethnocide" and "explosive combination of ethnic mixing" (Le Pen in Holmes 2000: 70) – to be a return to bonds based on similarity and a solidarity centred in concentric circles around the family, extending to the nation, perhaps also to "European civilisation" (but certainly not European integration). Holmes cites Taguieff who terms Le Pen's position "bio-material mysticism", where trans-individual continuity is safeguarded at the levels of family and nation. "The integrity of the territory, the purity of identity and the

³¹⁴ Holmes builds his description on Paul Rabinow's (1989) analysis of technocratic modernity in 20th-century France that inspired the construction of community in the European Union.

integrality of the heritage must be simultaneously defended” (Taguieff 1991a: 44-45 in Holmes 2000: 70). In Le Pen’s words:

The nation is the community of language, interest, race, memories, and culture in which man develops harmoniously. He is attached to it by his roots, his dead, the past, heredity and heritage. Everything transmitted to him by the nation at birth is already of inestimable value. (Le Pen cited in Taguieff 1991a: 43 quoted in Holmes 2000: 70, italics omitted)

If Holmes is right in claiming that the search for belonging in an immediate experience of truth is a response to an increasing alienation from an elitist and technocratic state, similar causes might be at play in the slam milieu. As I showed in Chapter 8, in slam a similar mysticism exists in the human ontology and the potential for *plenitude* in the relations. In slam, however, truth is not found in roots, heritage and nation. It is found deep within “moments of humanity” “at the depths of souls where the thoughts and words are”, and it is accessible to all. From the transitions from one perspective to the other, in the ever-changing multiplicity of stories and trajectories evolving at the slam session, the slammers know that “language, interest, memories, and culture” do not spring from the land but are woven and interwoven with threads almost as much from afar as from the soil of the neighbourhood. The empathy and solidarity tying the participants together, I suggest are similar to the external force felt by the dry alcoholics in the Alcoholics Anonymous in Bateson’s article (1972). The alcoholics, like the slammers, have learnt through experience the correctness of the epistemology of complementarity and interdependence.

“Fast-capitalism” is the second source Holmes finds to the estrangement and rupture of belonging. The description of fast-capitalism (although not the term itself) Holmes takes mostly from Marilyn Strathern’s analysis of the impact of the attack on the idea of society by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Thatcherism that followed. Strathern’s analysis reminds me of the Situationists’ critique of the society of spectacle, which I have claimed implicitly infuses the ethos of Parisian slam:

The self-gratification of the individual as consumer is then bounced back to the consumer in the form of publicly sanctioned individualism (“privatisation”). The exercise of individual choice becomes the only visible form of public behaviour. ... [T]he result is to extract the person from its embedding in social relationships. (Strathern 1992: 169 quoted in Holmes 2000: 12, all brackets in original)

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Parisian slam reinstates the human as foremost a public being in lieu of the consumer, the alone television spectator, or “the sheep”, in numerous ways and at various levels: To a large extent the, per definition, free and open slam sessions function as an explicit critique of the human as a consumer. Furthermore, equal, dignified human beings are unconcealed, brought forth or created simultaneously with a “utopian democracy” through the collective practices and ethos of the sessions.

By discarding the collectivist idiom, Thatcher also discarded the grounds of class dialogue “that has dominated political debate and reform for the last two centuries”, Strathern argues (1992: 144 in Holmes 2000: 12). The result of Thatcher’s policies is the reduction of large parts of the British working class to an underclass, which is hard to reach politically, and where individualisation has replaced class solidarity (Holmes 2000: 101).³¹⁵ In Chapter 9, I interpreted the slam phenomenon as part of but also intensifying the tendencies of liquid modernity, in the sense that it frees the individual from the aggregated distinctions of social positions. The “radical individualism” Holmes found among “marginal sectors of the working class” and the “new poor” in Britain (2000: 101), there is however no sign of in the slam milieu. To the contrary, as I showed in Chapter 9: First, the societal basis for solidarity is far stronger in France than in the Anglo-American liberal tradition (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Furthermore, solidarity towards the others present at the sessions as well as far beyond the territory of the nation is enhanced both in practice and by familiarising with and humanising difference through the slammers’ stories, expressions and words.

³¹⁵ Bauman describes the same phenomenon of radical individualism on a wider scale in *Liquid Modernity*, which I presented in Chapter 9. Holmes refers only superficially to Bauman, probably because his and Bauman’s books were published the same year, in 2000.

The more correct epistemology of relational Europe

In *Europe and the People without History*, Eric Wolf (1997 [1982]) decentres modernity and the global capitalist system. “The idea” of *Europe and the People without History*, Eric Wolf explains in the preface to the second edition,

was to show that human societies and cultures would not be properly understood until we learned to visualize them in their mutual interrelationships and interdependencies in time and space. (Wolf 1997: X)

Wolf conceptualises these interrelationships and interdependencies in terms of the accelerating integration of a world market and the growth of capitalism since the 15th century. This integration has reshaped and continues to reshape most societies of the world. “[I]t is a major argument of the book that most of the societies studied by anthropologists are an outgrowth of the expansion of Europe and not the pristine precipitates of past evolutionary stages” (1997: 76). Thus, Eric Wolf writes at large what Nicholas Thomas, Marshall Sahlins, Peter Gow, Sidney Mintz, Nicholas Dirks, Arjun Appadurai, Jonathan Friedman, Bernard Cohn, S.J. Tambiah, and probably a large number of other historical anthropologists have shown in a smaller scale. Wolf’s bold assertion puts into context the second of Nicholas Thomas’s requirements for anthropologists who work with history: If ways of life, worldviews and indeed whole societies are the outgrowth of European colonial expansion, then indeed (universally) shared global history must be taken into account.

Wolf shows how the European expansion created a market of global scope as it incorporated pre-existing networks of exchange, created new itineraries between continents, fostered regional specialisation and initiated worldwide movements of commodities (1997: 352). He describes how extensive regions of the world were reorganised to supply material to factories and food for the new agglomeration of factory workers (1997: 293). Wolf’s detailed and well-founded argument and his exposition of the inter-social history we all share, explains the presence of difference in *La France Métissée*. Unless, however, this history is made accessible to all members of a society through indigenous narratives and understandings, Wolf’s knowledge will not remain

anything else than another elite discourse. It is this grounding and sharing of difference, relations and common humanity that takes place during Parisian slam sessions.

Endnotes: Poems in French

ⁱ There are some small differences between the following text and the version she performed this night. This version I got directly from Amaranta two years after that particular night.

Slamer, by Amaranta

Slamer

C'est ma mission

Pour casser la fiction

Chanter par Céline Dion

Et si t'as pas ta ration

Champion

Regarde l'horizon

Tu verras les raisons de quitter ta maison

Fraternisons sinon

Les quatre saisons

Deviendront

Une funèbre oraison

Sur notre condition

Comme c'est déjà ta vision

Des jours d'aujourd'hui

Perdu dans les rayons

Tu cherches le nouveau savon

Qui te rendra l'air moins c...

Les deux pieds dans le goudron

Peux-tu chanter ma bohème

Et être un homme d'affaire ?

Le bilan est sévère et même

Si j'exagère

T'as fait fuir la bergère.

Ni poésie écrite ni poésie orale

Ni rap ni chant ni slam

Dire est une bataille

Pour sortir du bétail

Qui part sur les rails

Des cités gigantesques

Contre les mages de métal

Supprimant presque
Tout l'espace vitale
Mais nos mots résonnent
Jusque dans les couloirs de Babylone
Car la Terre n'est à personne
Et chaque jour j'espère que leur glas sonne

Pour qui sont ces slameurs qui sifflent dans les fêtes ?
Pour ceux qui pleurent au fond des grottes inertes

Tout le monde est convié
De l'esthète du langage
A la dernière des bêtes
Il n'y a rien à faire
On a choisi
La classe
Dernière
La liberté sur terre

Ecoute l'alerte
De l'ère déjà entrouverte
Des paroles expertes
Dont le thème éternel
Eveille nos matins blêmes
Aime
Cour improvisée
Liée par le vers
Etre désiré
Armé de crayons laser
On envoie des rayons
Sur les cloisons amères

Pour qui sont ces slameurs qui sifflent dans les fêtes ?
Pour ceux qui meurent solitaires dans les prisons modernes

Ni Dieu ni Bouddha ni Islam
Ni Karma ni Esprit ni Âme
L'essence du mot c'est la flamme
D'une foule qui s'exclame
Une vague de poésie profane
Qui plane dans l'atmosphère
Et faire basculer l'enfer
vers le cours bleu rivière
De nos rêves calmes
Et chaque nuit j'espère

ii Entre les murs, by Abd el Haq (2007)

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, on s'épuise affrontant du regard l'inscription « jeux de ballons interdits ». Nous sommes libres de la braver en pleine face. Les buts, les filets, les fautes tout est imaginaire. Pas de place pour un arbitre. Les sifflets seulement pour passer la balle en mousse qui flotte sur le béton des dalles.

Nous parlons français sans nous poser de questions, l'intégration n'a pas de sens la sueur inondant nos fronts.

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, de plain-pied dans la réalité des fins de mois qui grimacent. Avec le sourire, nous sommes fiers d'avoir des baskets à deux traits. Conscients d'épargner le portefeuille de nos parents avec ces sous-marques de notre quotidien.

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, le jardin pour enfants jouxte le local à poubelles, l'autoroute est le seul paysage. Les gamins pour des brouillles s'attrapent à coups de tête dans les coins d'une mémoire courte : échange franches accolades contre fraîches cicatrices.

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, les pères parient les jours de congés : PMU, dames, rami. Les mères croient toutes au mauvais sort, gardent un œil sur les sœurs. Planquent les économies tout au fond de leurs soutiens-gorge « bonnet xxl » sans quitter leurs cuisines ouvertes aux voisines invitées permanentes. Commères VIP qui lâchent leurs cancons sous une pluie d' « inch allah »

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, les premiers baisers c'est parking niveau-1. Pas le temps d'être romantique, dans l'obscurité les gamins embrassent comme ils crachent les yeux rivés au sol.

Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse, le temps d'une promenade sur les toits, tu saisis rapidement pourquoi la pyramide des âges a les côtes cassées. Entre 20 et 30 ans, ils se piquent en rang les dents serrées. Toi, tu ouvres les yeux et la boucle. Si les jours se ressemblent ces choses ne se répètent pas. Entre les murs de la cité jaune qui sent la pisse.

iii Les orphelins, by Antoine Faure (Tô)

Nous sommes les orphelins, les sans pères
les sans peau, les sans repos, les sans repère
les sans référent – sans révérend.

Nous sommes les enfants perdus, abandonnés au bord de la route comme des chiens gênants par des propriétaires gênés, à l'aube d'un été qui n'est jamais venu. Cette vieille route humaine pavée de doutes, pavée de croûtes, de vieilles valeurs toujours galvaudées, toujours aveuglées par la grande Illusion, nous marchons dessus à reculons

de peur, pour ne pas répéter le vieux ronron. Déçus, nous sommes, de nous peaux et de nos pères, de l'humanité entière.

Vous avez tout voulu briser depuis le haut de vos rambardes éphémères et vous aviez raison, c'était le moment, il le fallait.

Mais vous pensiez alors, être meilleurs que ceux d'avant, que ce passé qui semblait dépassé, et vous rêviez alors, avec vos fleurs, vos acides et vos bannières ou vos livres rouges comme des bibles rêches. Vous tiriez à boulets sourds sur des cibles sèches. Votre grande libération et cui-cui les petits oiseaux n'a pas marché – têtes malines aux idées malingres d'ados amnésiques de leur acné – vous ne plantiez plus aucune graine sous les grands cèdres, la vie vous a rattrapés, la vie vous a rattrapés, a repris vos corps maigres car vous dansiez sur du vide et non sur la poussière des os de vos aînés.

Et rien n'a changé vraiment. Vous avez fait tomber les derniers bastions des croyances futiles qui se voulaient fertiles, les derniers horizons lointains des lendemains meilleurs qui ne chanteront jamais. Vous avez coupé les dernières racines des idéaux désincarnés.

On ne change pas la société en laissant l'humain de côté, et sa fosse profonde où se cache depuis toujours le sceptique. Vous avez mésestimé le pouvoir de la boue, du purin pur et dynamique d'où toute vie peut jaillir. Voilà ce que vous nous avez laissé.

Nous sommes les orphelins, les sans pères
les sans peau, les sans repos, les sans repère
les sans référent – sans révérend.

Et nous voulons plus d'idées. Elles ont toujours caché quelque chose de douteux finalement derrière tous les beaux discours à la belle prose, plus de principes bancals, rigides et frigides tirant toujours vers le putride et le pouvoir des chacals, non plus de systèmes toujours pervers, toujours sordides.

L'humain à l'étendard blanc, à l'étendard d'or ou bleu ou noir ou rouge sang, à l'appendice inutile, à la carapace protectrice, nous les rejetons maintenant. Nous ne voulons plus du schisme des « ismes » et leurs bouts de vérités toujours séparatistes. Quand on est quelque-chosiste, on se désiste, on perd l'odorat et le sens de la piste, on démissionne, on divise, on dénigre le multiple, le réel et le mystère.

Non ! Plus de trompe-l'œil pour fuir les rêves en semblant les forger avec un goût amer.

C'est la vie que nous voulons. La Vie.

Oui, nous avons peur, mais c'est la vie que nous voulons. La Vie.

Nous voulons mettre à jour tous les possibles, sentir en plein le stimulus des humus. Nous voulons retrouver la grande louve et mettre à bas Remus et Romulus. Nous voulons déchirer la robe tachée des Ponce Pilate qui toujours s'en laveront les mains. À bas

l'empire romain ! À bas l'empire romain ! à bas tous les empires de pire en pire ! Nous voulons devenir des humains, entiers, complets, incarnés, dans la totalité des composantes du vivat insaisissable, car il ne nous reste plus qu'une phrase, avec deux mots au sens insalissable : « Je suis ». Oui, un chemin au goût différent pour chacun et le même jour pour tous enfin, et le même jour pour tous enfin.

Le lait des étoiles, le sang bleu du ciel et le feu noir de la terre sont encore à boire, mais sans drapeau, sans drapé, sans rideau pour se protéger, à forger juste dans le secret de l'âme, pour prendre à bras-le-corps les sommets, les espoirs, les abysses et les déboires, pour faire grandir la foi et la flamme, pour faire grandir la foi et la flamme !

Nous sommes les orphelins, les sans pères
les sans peau, les sans repos, les sans repère
les sans référent – sans révérend.

Nous sommes plus denses : plus faux – plus vrais – plus souffreteux – plus valeureux – plus lâches – plus joyeux – nous cherchons toujours le Sens.
Et nous venons à peine de comprendre que c'est à nous maintenant de forger le monde pour y laisser notre héritage, pour laisser sur une autre page, l'empreinte de notre sonde.

Tout a déjà été fait
mais rien n'a encore jamais été !

^{iv} **La vie c'est dur, la vie c'est pas facile..., by Chantal Carbon (2008)**

Pour des raisons indépendantes de nôtre volonté ce texte est particulièrement d'actualité. Toute ressemblance avec des personnages ayant existé n'est pas entièrement fortuite.

Je suis bien obligée de constater que plus de la moitié des gens que je connais sont dépressifs ou chépers, ou les deux. Quand ils ne sont pas carrément morts par accident, overdose ou pendatison.

A ce sujet, j'ai remarqué que la pendaison c'est plutôt un truc de mecs, c'est sexuel. Même si y'a toujours une exception qui se sent obligée de confirmer la règle... D'habitude, les meufs préfèrent se tailler les veines. A cause des règles sans doute. Y'a aussi des techniques mixtes comme le fusil de chasse dans la bouche ou des excentriques qui boivent de l'acide chlorhydrique. Si, si... Y fallait y penser. Y'a vraiment des gens qui vont mal...

Y'a des jours où ça m'inquiète. Mes potes qui dépriment, mon ex qui angoisse, ma sœur qui stress...

Je ne supporte plus les problèmes des autres alors je ne vais plus au slam. Ras le bol de l'esclavage, de la police, des chagrins d'amour et de George Bush.

Et puis c'est vrai quoi, l'indifférence générale, c'est trop horrible, merde ! faut faire quelque chose ! pourquoi, toi quand tu vois un SDF dans la rue, tu l'invites à dormir chez toi ?

Et ouais, la vie c'est dur, la vie c'est pas facile...

Pour être tranquille, je reste chez moi et je coupe mon téléphone. Je ne veux plus rien savoir de la misère ou de la guerre mondiale alors j'ai jeté ma télé, éteint la radio et brûlé mes journaux.

Seulement, voilà, je pète un câble toute seule dans mon appartement et je me dis : oui on vit vraiment dans un monde de dingue.

Encore que j'ai pas trop à me plaindre mais ça m'avance à rien quand y me vient de drôles d'idées. Des trucs bizarres comme écraser une mère qui traverse sur les passages cloutés avec sa petite fille.

Dans ces cas là, je me dis que je ferai peut être bien de partir vivre à la campagne...

En plus, les gens qui vont mal, y vous racontent leurs problèmes.

Y pensent sans doute qu'on est leur ami et qu'on a que ça à foutre. Des fois y demandent même des conseils. Faut croire qu'ils n'ont pas l'courage d'aller chez le psy. Ou alors, y vont pas encore assez mal...

Quand on me demande des conseils, j'en ai toujours un ou deux sous la main. Avec une petite histoire drôle. Et ho je te remonte le moral. Les gens y croient que je vais bien ou quoi ? que je suis un modèle d'équilibre ? j'ai pourtant pas l'impression d'y ressembler. Ou alors c'est que je m'en rends pas compte.

Y'a des gens y sont encore plus sournois. Ya font exprès de pas vous dire qu'y vont mal, soit disant pour pas vous déranger. Après, y se foutent a gueule en l'air sans prévenir et ensuite on est obligé de culpabiliser. Ça, c'est pas très sympa.

Mais y'a quand même un truc dont les gens n'ont pas l'air de se rendre compte, c'est que si ça se trouve y'a une vie après la mort. Eh ouais. Alors du coup, au lieu d'être mort et bine tranquille, tu sais pas si tu vas te retrouver à errer dans les landes avec un drap blanc sur la gueule ou si Dieu va te prendre la tête ou bien si tu vas te réincarner au Rwanda en plein massacre inter ethnique, pour t'apprendre à pas déconner. C'est que la vie c'est sacrée... Alors dans le doute, autant prendre son mal en patience vu que de toute façon, au pire, on finira bien par mourir un jour.

Avant j'aurais bien voulu sauver le monde. Je me sentais un peu l'âme d'une assistante sociale super héroïque. Jusqu'au jour où un pote à qui j'avais remonté le moral toute la soirée est mort au petit matin. Bon, j'admets, sur ce coup là, faut dire qu'il avait pas vraiment fait exprès.

Alors, maintenant tout ça c'est fini. Les gens, y se démerdent. Si y z'en ont marre de la vie parce que c'est dur et que c'est pas facile, et en c'est sûr, j'y peux rien.

Est ce que je leur raconte mes problèmes moi, hein ? Non, bon alors. Sauf des fois, où avec mes potes, on fait des concours de symptômes.

On m'a dit récemment qu'y a aussi des gens qui vont bien et je suis parfaitement disposée à le croire. Il paraît même que quand on est entouré de gens qui vont bien et ben c'est vachement plus facile la vie. Ben ça aussi je veux bien le croire.

Des gens heureux, au comportement stable, qu'ont pas de visions, qui dorment la nuit, qui se taillent pas les veines, qui sont pas alcooliques, ni sous cachetons ou sous THC, qui prennent pas de la coke ou de X en croyant que ça fait chic, qui vont pas en prison, qu'ont pas eu l'idée saugrenue de faire exprès de choper le dass, qui s'embrouillent pas à chaque coin de rue, qu'ont jamais été artistes, punks, skinheads ou Haré Krishna...

Des gens qui surmontent leurs difficultés. Des gens bien quoi. Pas comme moi quoi. Moi, déjà j'ai pas beaucoup de difficultés et j'ai du mal à les surmonter. C'est le monde moderne quoi...

Pourtant c'est prouvé et même des fois j'en rencontre personnellement, y'a des gens qui vont bien.

Autant dire que j'en connais pas des masses.

Ouais y'a des jours où ça m'inquiète.

Des jours comme ça, où pour la Toussaint, on t'annonce un nouveau pendu à rayer d ton carnet d'existence.

Quand même les gens y sont pas chiés. Toujours à t'emmerder avec leur divorce, leur exil ou leur suicide...

Moi depuis que j'ai décidé d'aller bien, c'est l'enfer. Je sais plus comment faire. J'ai plus d'amis.

J'ai perdu tous mes repères. J'ai dû changer. Ranger ma collection de crochets de boucherie.

Prendre les choses en main. Reprendre les murs en blanc.

Je suis plus comme avant. Et comme avant tu m'connaissais pas et ben ça tombe bien.

J'suis incognito au pays de barjos.

Et je rayonne la joie de vivre. Si, si...

En tout cas, si tu vas mal, c'est sûr j'y peux rien. J'en ai rien à carrer de la société, de tes états d'âme et de tes poèmes. On est juste venus faire des beaux jeux de mots et on ressortira de là le cœur tout regaillardi. Pendant cinq minutes on y croira. Ouah ! putain, c'est beau c'que tu dis !

Seulement voilà, quand on va bien y faut y croire plus de cinq minutes et arrêter l'esprit cynique. Et puis un jour y faut bien s'décider à aller bien... Heureusement sur le tard j'me suis découvert un talent de comique. Comme quoi la dépression ça mène à tout. Ouais on peut rire de tout. C'est mieux que d'pleurer non ? alors que les morts reposent en paix et puis les autres restez vivants. Hein...

Un jour j'ai fait un vœu au bord du lac le plus haut du monde. Et depuis, je sais pourquoi j'écris.

^v **Moment d'humanité, by Souleymane Diamanka (2007).**

Je ne suis qu'un pauvre artiste au service de la beauté
Marchand de sentiments et de moments d'humanité
Pour les rimes passionnelles que mes vers commettaient
J'ai dû rendre des comptes à ma passion hiver comme été
Et j'ai trouvé ma voix dans cette écriture
Quand j'ai posé sur le papier des sanglots et des cris purs
Je remercie mes muses pour tout ce qu'elles font
Mais pour briller à la surface il faut parfois toucher le fond
Voilà ce que disait le poète malgré lui
Ce piéton insomniaque qui souffrait du mal des nuits
Avoir une passion de nos jours ça évite pas mal d'ennuis
Car l'oisiveté est une graisse dont le mal s'enduit
Je pousse de toutes mes forces les portes de l'émotion
Voyage au fond des âmes où les pensées et les mots sont
Le griot et ses textes c'est l'architecte et ses maçons
Et quand se dressent les murs de l'imaginaire
Même la misère a ses moissons
Ce morceau c'est juste un moment d'humanité
Je ne suis qu'un pauvre artiste au service de la beauté
Qui attend l'inspiration pour écrire le poème
Qui attend l'inspiration pour que le poème soit doux comme les caresses que la peau aime
Il paraît que les paroles s'envolent et que les écrits restent
Moi j'ai mis de la sagesse dans les images
Pour que chacun de mes textes soit presque une fresque
Parfois ça ressemble à une séance d'hypnose
Car l'ambiance se fait dès que ma voix se pose
Une poésie mystérieuse occupe les subconscious
Et c'est l'art griotique venant du sud qu'on sent
J'ai attendu longtemps que le néant s'anime
Que chaque mot trouve sa phrase et que chaque phrase trouve sa rime
Le pays des songes est derrière une grande colline
Pour écrire je me sers de la réalité comme d'une trampoline
Et si un jour ils te demandent qui je suis réponds leur que tu ne sais pas
Mais s'ils insistent dis leur que je suis Dujaabi Jeneba

^{vi} **Les poètes se cachent pour écrire, by Souleymane Diamanka (2007)**

Les mots sont des vêtements de l'émotion
Et même si nos stylos habillent bien nos phrases
Peuvent-ils vraiment sauver nos frères du naufrage ?
Les poètes se cachent pour écrire
C'est pas une légende Rouda regarde nous
On a traversé des rivières de boue à la nage
On a dormi à jeun dans la neige et on est encore debout
Les poètes se cachent pour écrire

Chacun purge sa pénombre
Dans une solitude silencieuse que certains pourraient craindre
On somme les mots de s'additionner comme des nombres
La poésie opère comme une lumière mangeuse d'ombre
J'aime cet état mais le temps qu'on passe à l'attendre
N'est pas si tendre
Parfois il faut presque s'éteindre pour l'atteindre
Versificateur notoire chaque rime est une cascade
Dans les lieux oratoires l'auditoire n'aime pas les phases fades
Dans ma vie j'ai écrit plus de textes
Que ne reflète d'étoiles le grand lac Tchad
J'ai cherché la vérité dans les lignes de chaque énigme
De chaque conte et de chaque charade
J'ai interrogé les bons médiums pour chasser les mauvais djinns
Et j'ai répondu Amiini quand ma mère m'a dit Mbaalen he jam
J'ai couru après les horizons sur chaque page
Avec l'énergie des anciens possédés par le Jazz
Pour ne pas avoir à jouer à cache-cache avec le Diable
Les poètes se cachent pour écrire
C'est pas une légende John Banzaï regarde-nous
Toi et moi c'est l'écriture qui nous lie
C'est dans la solitude qu'on apprend la convivialité
Et tans pis pour celui qui le nie
Le feu passe au vers et l'oralité passe par nous
Le verbe est une clé indispensable
Dehors on nous demande de mots de passe-partout
Les poètes se cachent pour écrire
C'est pas une légende Grand Corps Malade regarde nous
On a traversé des rivières de boue à la nage
On a dormi à jeun dans la neige
Et on est encore debout. (Diamanka 2007)

vii **Orphée sans frein, by Antoine Faure (Tô)**

Je suis braise dévalant des vallées sans chemin
je suis nécessité sans sentier
je suis pièce de chair en chantier
je suis perché
je suis par vents et par mots, je suis paravent, je suis coupe feu
je suis fenêtre ouverte à toutes les portes
je suis bris de verre, je suis fleur morte
je suis à ciel ouvert, je suis bleu.

Je suis pas fini
parfois pas finaud, si fier d'être fuite
je suis fumiste enfumé, branleur solitaire

je suis sot l'air de lune, je suis saut sur la dune
je suis l'art de l'air, je suis ère de dire l'air de rien
je suis errant dans un rire divin
je suis celui qu'on attend, tellement moins et rarement plus
je suis pêle-mêle hirsute et pelé, singe à plume sous l'abri bus
je suis colle décollée du bulbe, liant délirant,
gigantesque rachidien, rachitique arabesque.

Je suis vertige, je suis vestige, je suis ruine
je suis monde à l'arrêt, je suis terre en mouvement
je suis grille, je suis vrille, je suis mine
je suis dangereux, je suis vivant volcan
je suis cratère surface ombre et plaine
je suis plante, je suis plate, je suis banane plantain, organe à dégainé
je suis aigu, bec et ongle, rapace à chair rose, je suis gorille et goret
je suis vorace, je suis oreille, forêt, antenne à plasma, forteresse à volet
je suis poison, aspic, aspi venin - aspirant des veines parfois inspirées.

Je suis coup de lime, je suis goût de l'âme, bout de l'homme
je suis pierre de brume, je suis clair de satin
je suis danse de fées et rie aux éclats
je suis Orphée sans frein.

viii **Saint Denis, by Grand Corps Malade (2006).**

J'voudrais faire un slam
pour une grande dame que j'connais depuis tout petit
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour celle qui voit ma vieille canne du lundi au samedi
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour une vieille femme dans laquelle j'ai grandi
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour cette banlieue nord de Paname qu'on appelle Saint-Denis

Prends la ligne D du RER
et erre dans les rues sévères d'une ville pleine de caractère
Prends la ligne 13 du métro
et va bouffer au McDo ou dans les bistrots
d'une ville pleine de bonnes gos et de gros clandos

Si t'aimes voyager, prends le tramway et va au marché
En une heure, tu traverseras Alger et Tanger,
tu verras des Yougos et des Roms,
et puis j't'emmènerais à Lisbonne
Et à 2 pas de New-Deli et de Karashi
(t'as vu j'ai révisé ma géographie),

j't'emmènerai bouffer du Mafé à Bamako et à Yamoussoukro

Et si tu préfères, on ira juste derrière
manger une crêpe là où ça sent Quimper
et où ça a un petit air de Finistère
Et puis en repassant par Tizi-Ouzou, on finira aux Antilles,
là où il y a des grosses re-noi qui font
« Pchit, toi aussi kaou ka fê la ma fille ! »

[...]

Après le marché on ira ché-mar rue de la République,
le sanctuaire des magasins pas chers
La rue préférée des petites re-beus bien sapées
aux petits talons et aux cheveux blonds peroxydés

Devant les magasins de zouk, je t'apprendrai la danse ;
les après-midis de galère, tu connaîtras l'errance
Si on va à la Poste j't'enseignerai la patience...

La rue de la République mène à la Basilique
où sont enterrés tous les rois de France, tu dois le savoir !
Après Géographie, petite leçon d'histoire
Derrière ce bâtiment monumental, j't'emmène au bout de la ruelle,
dans un petit lieu plus convivial, bienvenu au Café Culturel !

On y va pour discuter, pour boire, ou jouer aux dames
Certains vendredi soir, y'a même des soirées Slam
Si tu veux bouffer pour 3 fois rien,
j'connais bien tous les petits coins un peu poisseux
On y retrouvera tous les vauriens, toute la jet-set des aristocrasseux

Le soir, y'a pas grand chose à faire,
y'a pas grand chose d'ouvert
A part le cinéma du Stade, où les mecs viennent en bande :
bienvenue à Caille-ra-Land [...]

C'est pas une ville toute rose mais c'est une ville vivante
Il s'passe toujours quelque chose, pour moi elle est kiffante [...]

[...] A cette putain de cité j'suis plus qu'attaché,
même si j'ai envie de mettre des taquets
aux arracheurs de portables de la Place du Caquet

Saint Denis ville sans égal,
Saint Denis ma capitale,

Saint Denis ville peu banale...
où à Carrefour tu peux même acheter de la choucroute Hallal!
Ici on est fier d'être dyonisiens, j'espère que j't'ai convaincu
Et si tu m'traites de parisien, j't'enfonce ma béquille dans l'...

J'voudrais faire un slam
pour une grande dame que j'connais depuis tout petit
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour celle qui voit ma vieille canne du lundi au samedi
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour une vieille femme dans laquelle j'ai grandi
J'voudrais faire un slam
pour cette banlieue nord de Paname qu'on appelle Saint-Denis.

^{ix} **On a commencé à courir, by Marie-Françoise**

On a commencé à courir
Parce que les flics nous poursuivaient
On manifestait pacifiquement
Et sans aucun armement
Contre la chasse au faciès
Et le couvre feu
Qui nous étaient imposés

La manifestation était interdite
Les flics nous ont tabassés
Des milliers d'entre nous,
Vers des centres de détention ont été emmenés
Des dizaines, dans la Seine ont été jetés
Environ trois cent furent tués
Ca se passait sur les boulevards parisiens
Nous étions tous algériens
C'était le 17 octobre 1961

Celui qui avait cautionné
Cette sauvage répression
C'était le préfet de police
Maurice Papon

On a commencé à courir
Parce que les flics nous poursuivaient
On manifestait pacifiquement
Et sans aucun armement
Pour la paix en Algérie
La veille, il y avait eu dix attentats OAS dans Paris
La manifestation était interdite

Les flics nous ont tabassés

Les grilles du métro Charonne étaient fermées
Des grilles d'arbres sur nous par les flics ont été jetées
Neuf d'entre nous sont morts frappés, étouffés, écrasés
Le plus jeune avait seulement quinze ans
Il s'appelait Daniel Ferry
Ca se passait sur le boulevard Voltaire à Paris

Nous étions tous des communistes français
C'était le 8 février 1962
Celui qui avait cautionné cette sauvage répression
C'était le Préfet de Police Maurice Papon

On n'a pas pu commencer à courir
Quand des flics français à l'aube sont venus nous chercher
On était des malades à l'hosto
Des malades en sanatorium
Des vieillards en maison de retraite
Des enfants en famille d'accueil

Ou des familles tout simplement
Dormant chez nous tranquillement

Entre 1942 et 1944 environ
1560 juifs de la région de Bordeaux
Dont 220 enfants
Furent arrêtés par les flics français
Et emmenés en déportation
Vers les camps d'extermination nazis

Celui qui avait cautionné
Ces sauvages arrestations
C'était le Secrétaire Général
De la Préfecture de la Gironde
Chargé de la question juive
Un certain Maurice Papon

Pour ces derniers faits,
Plus de cinquante ans plus tard,
Il fût le seul haut fonctionnaire français
A être condamné pour crime contre l'humanité
A dix ans de réclusion
Pour ne pas payer à ses victimes des indemnités
Il a arrangé son insolvabilité

Il a légué à ses héritiers
Sa belle propriété de Gretz-Armainvilliers
Il est même allé demander à sa mairie
Une sorte de RMI
On le lui a refusé

Après trois ans de détention,
Soi-disant grabataire,
De la prison de la santé il est sorti
Mais c'est sur ses deux pieds
Qu'ironique et méprisant il est parti

Ca m'a fait penser
A un autre soi-disant grabataire
Qui quitta sa prison d'Angleterre
Pour retourner au Chili
Et là ô miracle arrivé sur sa terre,
De son fauteuil roulant il s'est levé
Et ironique et méprisant il est parti

Ce général Pinochet est mort dans son lit
Dans sa quatre vingt douzième année
Papon est mort tranquillement dans son lit
Dans sa quatre vingt dix septième année

Il a toujours dit qu'il n'avait ni regrets, ni remords
Mais nous, les juifs, algériens, communistes,
A cause de lui,
Sauvagement,
On est morts.

^x **La muslière, Hocine Ben (2007)**

Novembre 2005, mon quartier a la gueule de bois.
Mon voisin pleure sa vieille caisse, ma télé crache ses discours de
Langue de bois.
Cette année, l'automne est reparti deux enfants sur les bras.
On peut échapper aux condés, à son destin on n'échappe pas...

Novembre 2005, y a de l'orage dans l'air et des odeurs de feu d'artifice.
Y a les anciens qui par la fenêtre regardent courir leurs fils.
Un an a passé depuis, elles sont déjà loin les caméras.
Nous laissant à nos « parce que » nous laissant à nos « pourquoi ? »

Pourquoi tant d'épithètes recouvrent les murs de nos quartiers ?
Pourquoi si peu de taf alors que nos pères furent par centaines

Recrutés ?

Pourquoi même nos élus sont-ils atteints de cécité ?

Pourquoi les écharpes tricolores ne fleurissent-elles pas dans la plupart
De ces cités ?

Moi ? Si j'étais un livre d'Histoire, je rougirais de honte.

Tous ces mots qui ne servent à rien, tous ces silences qui s'affrontent.

Font de la mémoire un terrain miné, un édifice inachevé.

Un chantier sans ouvriers, voilà pourquoi je vole à son chevet.

Alors dis-moi, mémoire, dis-moi pourquoi tu flanches ?

Dis-moi pourquoi les miens n'apparaissent que sur tes pages

Blanches ?

Moi je suis pas Superman, j'ai pas de super pouvoirs.

Mais j'ai les yeux ouverts, je lis à travers les vêtements du pouvoir.

Le monde sera sauvé, par les enfants le les fous.

Par le cancre analphabète qui en silence sommeille en vous !

Pour moi prendre le MIC, c'est prendre le maquis.

Assumer sa position, même au milieu du jeu de quilles.

Car je n'écris pas pour l'élite, je n'écris pas pour mes élus.

Ma poésie elle sent pas bon, infréquentable, ma poésie sent le vécu !

Alors faites passer le mot, dites-leur que OUI, ns murs ont des
Oreilles.

Et qu'après 40 piges en France, nos parents n'ont toujours pas de
Cartes vermeilles.

Tu sais, tu peux toujours rénover nos tours, si tu ne rénoves pas ton
Regard...

Mon slam t'attend au tournant pour te raviver la mémoire.

Novembre 2005, elles sont encore chaudes les braises...

Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès, en avoir 15 dans le 93 !

Dieu créé l'homme, l'homme a créé le poète.

Le poète récréé l'univers avec des « si » et des « peut-être »...

Dieu, il a aussi créé le chien, l'homme lui a mis un muselière.

Mais on ne fait pas taire les grandes gueules aujourd'hui, comme on ne les a pas fait taire
hier !

Non ! On ne fera pas taire le poète en muselant son chien.

Comme on n'éteint pas un feu de brousse un Kärcher à la main !

^{xi} 7 : 28, by Ucoc Lai

En pénétrant dans cet aéroport
j'avais déjà un pied dans la planète France
c'était un jour de juillet 79 à 7 : 28 7 : 28
j'étais en stand-by au Viêt-nam depuis quatre ans
espérant ce jour d'embarcation
jour après jour
le temps d'apprendre hors loisir
quelques chansons enfantines
quelques mots de politesse
dans cette langue étrangère
que parlaient ceux qui ont colonisé ma terre ...
à 7 : 28 7 : 28
en arrivant dans l'enceinte de l'aérogare
la réalité prolongeait le rêve du petit gars que j'étais
tout était nouveau
tout était du jamais vu
le ciel était sans nuage ... ce jour-là
le soleil était au rendez-vous ... tôt ce matin-là
moi je devais attendre encore des heures ... là
avant de fouler le sol français
domaine tant pensé
territoire à découvrir
personne ne voulait rater l'avion
on était arrivé à 7 : 28 7 : 28
bien que le décollage n'était prévu qu'en fin de journée
à 7 : 28 7 : 28
la première chose que j'ai vue
en entrant dans cet aéroport ... c'était
ce panneau qui indiquait l'heure 7 : 28
la nuit de ce jour J
on m'a réveillé à l'aurore
pour être là
à 7 : 28 7 : 28
je crois que la fatigue
et les sentiments que je n'avais pas pu analyser qui se cumulaient
en ce jour de juillet 79
ont fait que
le temps
me semblait être arrêté
à 7 : 28 7 : 28
une fois assis sur un banc
et pendant très longtemps
je ne pensais à rien
je ne désirais rien
je n'avais pas la force de bouger

pas l'envie de bouger
même l'esprit était immobile
et l'adulte que je suis devenu est presque sûr
que le bébé que j'étais
avait du connaître cet abandon total
juste avant de prendre
le tunnel qui menait à l'autre monde
est-ce que je suis né à 7 : 28
il ne restait plus aucun papier officiel
attestant mon acte de naissance
on m'aurait rajouté
deux ou trois années sur le passeport
ce passeport recevra le tampon sur le visa
République Française ... dans quelques heures
comme un bandage sur une blessure
appliqué à moi le survivant de la folie
de ces khmers qui sortaient diplômés ou pas de la Sorbonne
de ces khmers qui ont dévoré des livres sur la Révolution Française
et en ce jour de l'été 79
la France de Giscard ... l'accordéoniste
monsieur « au revoir »
m'avait accordé le statut
de réfugié politique
comme on administre un vaccin
contre la maladie coloniale française
j'ai dû dire intérieurement
entre l'isolement et le questionnement
durant le décollage et l'atterrissage
comme lors de cette opération chirurgicale sans anesthésie au dos
avec des soulèvements au cœur
avec de l'ironie qui se moque de l'ironie
« au revoir Viêt-nam ennemi de toujours...
bonjour France ennemie des beaux jours »

xii L'Hiver Peul, by Souleymane Diamanka (2007)

Je m'appelle Souleymane Diamanka dit Duajaabi Jeneba
Fils de Boubacar Diamanka dit Kanta Lombi
Petit-fils de Maakaly Diamanka dit Mamadou Tenen
Arrière-petit-fils de Demba Diamanka dit Lenngel Nyaama
Etc etc
J'ai été bercé par les vocalises silencieuses de mes ancêtres
Et je sais que cette voix jamais elél ne se taira
Elle me souhaitera d'être un digne héritier de ce peuple nomade
D'être Duajaabi Jeneba l'enfant peul

Descendant de Bilaali Sadi Hole le bien nommé
Haal pulaar peuple d'amour dont le pays est un poème
Et le drapeau une mosaïque de millier de proverbes
le peuple Peul et ses dictons c'est comme la savane et ses hautes herbes
Comme l'océan glacé et ses gouttes d'eau
Comme le Sahara brûlant et ses grains de sable

Haal Pulaar peuple migrateur d'orateurs
Dont Amadou Hampathé Ba a été l'ambassadeur
On passe à l'heure de l'oralité manuscrite
Qui comme un perle de lune perce la brume
Le jour où il écrit de sa plus belle plume
« En Afrique un viellard qui meurt c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle » [... in CD sleeve]
[Peuple bergère qui a fait de la parole un art
Qui a moins peur de la mort que perdre de l'honneur
Un baobab genealogique qui a ses racines en afrique et sa cime en Europe
Le tronc de ces traditions a ses faiblesses et ses forces
et les orages identitaires abiment son écorce

Haal pulaar peuple Gitan du Sahel
Venu s'abreuver par la force des choses au lac des sédentaires
Quelques siècles avant de partir pour un terrain occidental accidenté
De la saison de la misère les prisonniers se libèrent seuls
J'ignore les secret des titres à succès que les libraires veulent
Mais ce captured de leur Histoire aurait pu s'appeler l'hiver Peul

[his father's voice intermezzo]

Des piétons d'une ancestrale Afrique de l'Ouest
Affrontent la souffrance la soif et le froid jusqu'à la France
Pour mettre leur familles à l'abri de la famine
Pendant leurs nuits d'insomnies
Ils se demandent où sommes-nous ?
Et du fond des âges les esprits répondent à l'unisson
Nous sommes loin de là où nous sommes nés
Dans une brousse urbaine et hostile
Capable de dresser la barrière de la langue
Au sein d'un foyer comme un désaccord au cœur d'une ligue
Alors que les mots sont presque le seul héritage que les parents lèguent
| Les voyageurs ne savent plus où ils vont et la route risque d'être longue [...]

[leurs sagesses restent muettes. Ils observent les gens qui s'agitent.
Et ils comprennent dans le miroir que les gens dressent sur leur passage
(Que ?) c'est le visage de l'étranger dont il s'agit
le regard cette terre inconnu la nuit/l'ennui de nostalgie

comme on regarde l'océan au bord d'un radeau
à la dérive quelque part entre le port de Dakar et le port de Bordeaux]

Les paupiers closes et les joues creuses ils se souviennent
Ils se souviennent du village des fruits des odeurs et de tous les détails
Des marches vers l'horizon des rizières dérisoires et des têtes de bétail
Ils gardent en mémoire les adages venus du fin fond du Fouladou
Depuis qu'ils ont dit « ladde naabo »
Leur vie n'a plus tout à fait le même goût
Mais ils sourient quand même sur leur sort
Ils remontent leurs manches
Et ils soufflent sur leurs doigts pour en réchauffer les bouts
Ils apprennent à leurs enfants qu'ils sont des princes
Qu'ils viennent d'un royaume de sagesse humble
Un peuple de rois qui travaille la terre dans la peur de gens simples
Là où la nature se sent insultée quand on la traite de jungle
Même soi c'est le soleil qui la sèche et la pluie qui la rince
Ils aiment à dire que la noblesse de l'âme panse nos blessures
Et qu'elle n'appartient ni aux riches ni aux pauvres
Chacun sait ce qui l'y oblige ou l'y oppose
Leur ambition est humaine ils ont réussi le plus dur
Voir leurs enfants grandir en France et devenir des sculptures
D'adultes debout en équilibre sur deux cultures
(his father's voice)

Si seulement je pouvais vous traduire
Ce que mon père est en train de dire
Les phrases qu'il prononce n'auront jamais connu l'encre
Mais quand il ferme les yeux
C'est dans la mémoire d'un peuple tout entier qu'il entre
Il récite l'encyclopédie humaine
D'une dynastie que son âme connaît par cœur
Alors qu'elle n'a pas encore été écrite et il pale à la terre
Car elle seule sait garder les secrets
Haal Pulaar ses métaphores sont précieuses car elles sont précises
À la fois proches et lointaines comme le reflet d'une étoile dans un étang
Le paysan n'a pas toujours les mains propres
Mais les racines de son verbe baignent dans la poésie
J'ai bu ses paroles jusque dans son cœur
Et croyez-moi une immense source y est

Mon père était berger avant d'être ouvrier
Il était prince avant d'être pauvre
Avant ce bâtiment quelconque dans la clarté des oubliés
Il habitait dans une case immense à Same Kanta en Casamance

Et il a quasiment bravé la mort en dansant autour du feu
Comme la fumée d'un bâton d'encens
Pour entrevoir un avenir meilleur pour sa femme et ses enfants
De la saison de la misère les prisonniers se libèrent seuls
Ce chapitre de mon on histoire aurait pu s'appeler l'hiver peul.

References

- 129H. [Online]. Available at <www.129h.com> [Accessed 24.05.2011].
- 9ème Collectif des sans-papiers [online]. Available at <http://9emecollectif.net/> and at <http://pajol.eu.org/rubrique154.html> [Both accessed 04.07.2008].
- 9ème Collectif des sans-papiers. Sarkozy has forgotten that his parents are foreigners. 29.01.2006. [Online]. Available at <http://lists.indymedia.org/pipermail/imc-france-paris/2006-January/0130-gh.html> [Accessed 04.07.2008].
- A Belleville, travaux pratiques policiers devant les écoliers in *Liberation* 23.03.2011. [online] by Christophe Boltanski. Available through *Liberation* at <http://www.liberation.fr/societe/010197385-a-belleville-travaux-pratiques-policiers-devant-les-ecoliers> [Accessed 19.08.2011].
- Anderson, Elijah, 1990. *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, Elijah, 2004. The Cosmopolitan Canopy. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* [e-journal] Vol. 595, Being Here and Being There: Fieldwork Encounters and Ethnographic Discoveries (Sep., 2004), pp. 14-31. Available through JSTOR. [Accessed 15.12.2011].
- Appadurai, Arjun, 1996. The Production of Locality. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Aptowicz, Cristin O'Keefe, 2008. *Words in Your Face: A guided tour through twenty years of the new york city poetry slam*. New York: Soft Skull.
- Ardener, Edwin, 1975. Belief and the Problem of Women. In: Shirley Ardener ed. 1975. *Perceiving Women*, London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd, pp. 1-17.
- Asian Dub Foundation, 1995. Debris. From: *Facts and Fiction*. [CD]. London: Beggars Banquet Records.

- Atelier du Plateau. [Online]. Available at < <http://atelierduplateau.free.fr/>> [Accessed 31.05.2011].
- Avoir vingt ans dans les Aures de René Vautier. [online] Available at <<http://www.abc-lefrance.com>> [Accessed 15.12.2011].
- Barkat, Sidi Mohammed, (n.d.). A propos d'un massacre colonial. Le colonisé comme corps d'exception. Available through *17 octobre 1961: contre l'oubli* at <<http://17octobre1961.free.fr/pages/dossiers/barkat.htm>> [Accessed 12.01.2012].
- Barkat, Sidi Mohammed, 2005. *Le Corps d'Exception: Les Artifices du Pouvoir Colonial et la Destruction de la Vie*. Paris: Édition Amsterdam.
- Bateson, Gregory, 2000 [1972]. The Cybernetics of "Self": A Theory of Alcoholism. In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt, 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ben, Hocine, 2002. Citizen Ben. In: Stéphane Martinez, ed., *Anthologie du slam*. Paris: Seghers, pp. 122-124.
- Ben, Hocine, 2007. La Musèlière. In: *BLAH! - L'Anthologie du slam 1997-2007*. By Collectif, eds. Paris: Coédition SPOKE Editions / Florent MASSOT, pp. 255-256
- Benbassa, Esther, 2010. Jeunes de cités. In Benbassa, Esther, ed. *Dictionnaire des Racismes, de l'exclusion et des discriminations*. 2010, Paris: Larousse, pp. 422-3.
- Bender, Barbara, 2002. Time and Landscape. In: *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 43 (S4).
- Beriss, David, 2004. *Black skins, French Voices: Caribbean Ethnicity and Activism in Urban France*. Boulder, Colo./Oxford: Westview.
- Bertho, Alain, 2009. *Le Temps des Émeutes*. Montrouge: Bayard.
- Bertrand, Romain, 2006: *Mémoires d'Empire. La Controverse autour du « Fait Colonial »* Broissieux: Éditions du Croquant, coll. Savoir/Agir.
- Blanchard, Pascal, 2005: La France, entre deux immigrations. In: Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., 2005: *La Fracture Coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, pp. 173-182.
- Blanchard, Pascal and Veyrat-Masson, Isabelle, eds. 2008. *Les guerres de mémoires: La France et son histoire. Enjeux politiques, controverses historiques, stratégies médiatiques*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.

- Blanchard, Pascal, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., 2005: *La Fracture Coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated from French by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1979. *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1984 [1979]. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated from French by Richard Nice. London/Melbourne/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1995 [1979]. *Distinksjonen: En Sosiologisk Kritik av Dømmekraften*. Translated from French to Norwegian by Annick Prieur. Oslo: Pax Forlag AS.
- Bourriaud, Nicholas, 2002, *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du reel.
- Buck-Morss, Susan 2000. Hegel and Haiti. In *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (4), pp. 821-865.
- Carbon, Chantal, 2008. La vie c'est dur, la vie c'est pas facile... In: Audrey Chenu, Chantal Carbon, CatMat, Fleur, Marie Martias and Shein B. *Slam Ô Feminin*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Casario, Cesare and Negri, Antonio, 2004. It's a powerful life: A conversation on contemporary philosophy. [Online]. In *Cultural Critique*. No. 57 (Spring) 2004. Available through JSTOR. [Accessed 17.01.2012].
- Castañeda, Ernesto, 2010. Banlieue. In: Hutchinson, Ray ed., *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*. Vol.1. Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore: Sage Publications.
- Chollet, Mona, 2005. Mona Chollet présente et commente le dernier ouvrage de Sidi Mohammed Barkat: *Le corps d'exception - Les artifices du pouvoir colonial et la destruction de la vie* [online] Available at Ligue de Droite de l'Homme Toulon. <<http://www.ldh-toulon.net/spip.php?article1018>> [Accessed 11-01-2011].
- Constitution of the Fifth Republic [online]. Available at <<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp>> [Accessed 16.11.2011].
- Corbin, Alain, 2006. History and memory. In, Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*. New York: Colombia University Press.

- Das, Veena, 1995a. The anthropology of pain. In Veena Das, ed. 1995. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 175-196.
- Das, Veena, 1995b. Voices as birth of culture. *Ethnos* 60 (3-4), pp. 159-179.
- Das, Veena, 1996. Language and body: Transactions in the construction of pain. In *Daedalus* 125 (1), pp. 67-91.
- Days of Glory* [Original title: *Indigènes*], 2006. [Film]. Directed by Rachid Bouchareb. France: Tessalit Productions.
- D de Kabal. [Online]. Available at <http://www.d2kabal.com/ateliers_2.html> [Accessed 03.06.2011].
- D' de Kabal: Jamais trop tard pour être conscient. 21.01.2008. [Online]. Available through *Gens de la Caribbe* at <http://www.gensdelacaraibe.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3007:d-de-kabal-jamais-trop-tard-pour-etre-conscient&catid=50> [Accessed 31.05.2011].
- Debord, Guy, 1957. Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action. Translated from French by Ken Knabb. [online] Available at <<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>> [Accessed 11.08.2011].
- Debord, Guy, 2009. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated from French by Ken Knabb. Eastbourne: Soul Bay Press Ltd.
- Delanty, Gerard, 2009. *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, 2004 [1968]. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated from French by Paul Patton. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, 1994. From What is philosophy? In: Gary Gutting ed. *Continental Philosophy of Science*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 258-262
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, 2004 [1980]. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated from French by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum.
- Dgiz, 2007. "Dgiz Horz". Blah! Une Anthologie du Slam. Éditions Florent Massot et Spoke édition.

- Dgiz, 2007. Dgiz Hors. In: *BLAH! - L'Anthologie du slam 1997-2007*. By Collectif, eds. Paris: Coédition SPOKE Editions / Florent MASSOT, pp. 133-138.
- Diamanka, Souleymane. 2007. L'art ignare. On *L'Hiver Peul* [cd]. France: Barclay.
- Diamanka, Souleymane. 2007. L'hiver peul. On *L'Hiver Peul* [cd]. France: Barclay.
- Diamanka, Souleymane. 2007. Le chagrin des anges. On *L'Hiver Peul* [cd]. France: Barclay.
- Diamanka, Souleymane. 2007. Les poètes se cachent pour écrire. On *L'Hiver Peul* [cd]. France: Barclay.
- Diamanka, Souleymane. 2007. Moment d'humanité. On *L'Hiver Peul* [cd]. France: Barclay.
- Downey, Greg, 2007. Seeing with a "sideways glance": visuomotor "knowing" and the plasticity of perception. In: M. Harris, ed., *Ways of Knowing: New Approaches in the Anthropology of Experience and Learning*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. 1991. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge, Mass./London, England: The MIT Press.
- Dubois, Laurent 2000: "La République Métissée Citizenship, colonialism, and the borders of French history" in *Cultural Studies*. Vol 14(1).
- Durkheim, Emile, 1915. *The Elementary forms of Religious Life*. Translated from French by Joseph Ward Swain. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Education at a Glance, 2002 and 2010. Table 420 and 421 in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Available at <<http://www.oecd.org/>> [Accessed 19.06.2011].
- Education sans frontières. [online] Available at <<http://www.educationsansfrontieres.org/>> [Accessed 19.08.2011].
- Fabian, Johannes, 2010. Ethnography and Memory. In Marit Melhuus, Jon P. Mitchell and Helena Wulff, eds. 2010. *Ethnographic Practice in the Present*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.16-27.
- Fagerlid, Cicilie, 2001. *Beyond Ethnic Boundaries? British Asian Cosmopolitans*. Unpublished Cand. Polit thesis, University of Oslo.
- Fagerlid, Cicilie, 2006. Theatre: In our full conscience and honesty. *Cicilie among the Parisians*, 10.10.2006, [blog]. Available at

- <http://www.antropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2006/theatre_in_full_conscience_and_honesty> [Accessed 16.05.2011].
- Fagerlid, Cicilie, 2006. Art in the suburbs. *Cicilie among the Parisians*, 10.10.2006, [blog]. Available at <http://www.antropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2007/art_in_the_suburbs> [Accessed 19.09.2011].
- Fagerlid, Cicilie, 2007. Discussing slam poetry on TV and the schism in French slam. *Cicilie among the Parisians*, 26.03.2007, [blog]. Available at <http://www.antropologi.info/blog/cicilie/2007/discussing_slam_poetry_on_tv_the_schism> [Accessed 4.09.2011].
- Fagerlid, Cicilie, 2008. Poetisk opprør – slampoesi i Paris. *Arr. Idéhistorisk tidsskrift* 2008 (1/2)
- Feagin, Susan L., 1999, Aesthetics. In: Robert Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11-13.
- Ficher, Sibylle, 2004. *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fight Club*, 1999. [Film]. Directed by David Fincher. United States of America: Fox 2000 Pictures.
- Foucault, Michel, 1982, Afterword: The Subject and Power. In: Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds. 1982. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 208-226.
- French 'love' artist discovered, 05.12.2003. [online]. Available through *BBC News* at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3294859.stm>> [Accessed 31.05.2011].
- Frye, Northrop, 1957. Anatomy of criticism. Four essays. [Online]. Available at <<http://northropfrye-theanatomyofcriticism.blogspot.com/2009/02/fourth-essay-rhetorical-criticism.html>> [Accessed 18.01.2012].
- Geertz, Clifford, 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana Press. An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers.
- Glissant, Édouard 1997 [1990]. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated from French by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Gould, Roger, V., 1995. *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Graeber, David, 2002, The New Anarchists. In: *New Left Review* [online] 13, January-February 2002. Available at <<http://newleftreview.org/A2368>> [Accessed 11.01.2011].
- Graeber, David, 2009, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Grand Corps Malade. 2006. Saint Denis. On *Midi 20*. [cd]. France: AZ, for Universal Records.
- Guène, Faïza, 2004. *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*. Paris: Livre de Poche Jeunesse.
- Handelman, Don, 2004. Introduction. Why Ritual in its Own Right? How so? In *Social Analysis*. 48 (2), pp. 1-31.
- Haq, Abd el, 2007. Entre les murs. In: *BLAH! - L'Anthologie du slam 1997-2007*. By Collectif, eds. Paris: Coédition SPOKE Editions / Florent MASSOT, pp. 29-30.
- Haraway, Donna, 1988. Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. [Online]. In *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14 (3). Available through JSTOR, pp. 575-599.
- Haraway, Donna, 2000. *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyra Nichols Goodeve*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, 2004. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. London: Hamish Hamilton and imprint of Penguin Books.
- Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Hastrup, Kirsten, 1995. *A Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Heidegger, Martin, 1971, "...Poetically Man Dwells...". In: Poetry, Language, Thought. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heinich, Natalie, 2000. From Rejection Of Contemporary Art To Culture War. In: Lamont, Michele and Thévenot, Laurent eds., *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobart, Angela and Kapferer, Bruce, 2005. Introduction: The Aesthetics of Symbolic Construction and Experience. In: Hobart, Angela and Kapferer, Bruce, eds.,

- Aesthetics in Performance: Formations of Symbolic Construction and Experience*.
New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Holmes, Douglas C., 2000. *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Indymedia Paris-Île-de-France [online]. Available at <<http://paris.indymedia.org/>> [Accessed 19.08.2011].
- Ingerslev, C. F., 1866. *Græsk –Dansk Ordbok til Skolebrug*. Kjøbenhavn: Forlagt af den Gyldndalske Boghandel (F. Hegel).
- Ingold, Tim, 2000. *The Perception of the Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim, 2007. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim, 2008. Bindings against Boundaries: Entanglements of Life in an Open World. In *Environment and Planning* 2008, Vol. 40, pp. 1796-1810.
- Irving, Andrew and Reed, Adam, 2010. Is it Useful to Talk of a “Cosmopolitan Method”? Debate section in *Social Anthropology* 18 (4), pp. 454-463.
- Janss, Christian and Refsum, Christian, 2003. *Lyrikkens Liv: Innføring i Diktlesning*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Java, La. [Online]. Available at <<http://www.la-java.fr/historique.php>> [Accessed 26.09.2011].
- Johansen, Anders, 2003. *Samtalens tynne tråd: Skriveerfaringer*. Oslo: Spartacus Forlag.
- Josephaë [Online]. Available at <<http://josephae.com/>> [Accessed 06.06.2011].
- Kapferer, Bruce, 1984. The Ritual Process and the Problem of Reflexivity in Sinhalese Demon Exorcisms" in John J. MacAloon ed. 1984. *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, 1984. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, pp. 179-207.
- Kapferer, Bruce, 1997. *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kapferer, Bruce, 2005b. Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning. In: Don Handelman, and Galina Lindquist, eds., 2005. *Ritual in its Own Right: Exploring The Dynamics of Transformation*. New York: Berghahn Books.

- Kapferer, Bruce, 2005a. Sorcery and the Beautiful: A Discourse on the Aesthetics of Ritual. In: Angela Hobart and Bruce Kapferer, eds., 2005. *Aesthetics in Performance: Formations of Symbolic Construction and Experience*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Knausgård, Karl Ove, 2009. [Online video]. Interviewd in *Bokprogrammet*. Available through *nrk.no* at < <http://www.nrk.no/nett-tv/klipp/557443/>> [Accessed 18.01.2012].
- Lamont, Michèle and Thévenot, Laurent, 2000. Conclusion: Exploring the French and the American polity. In: Lamont, Michele and Thévenot, Laurent eds., *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamont, Michèle and Thévenot, Laurent, 2000. Introduction: Toward a Renewed Comparative Cultural Sociology. In: Lamont, Michele and Thévenot, Laurent eds., *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamont, Michèle, 2000. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. New York, N.Y. Cambridge, MA: Russell Sage Foundation Harvard University Press
- Lapeyronnie, Didier. 2005. La banlieue comme theatre colonial, ou la fracture coloniale dans les quartiers. In: Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., 2005: *La Fracture Coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, pp. 209-218.
- Leavitt, John and Hart, Lynn M., 1990. Critique de la " raison " sensorielle. L'élaboration esthétique des sens dans une société himalayenne. In *Anthropologie et Sociétés* [online] 14(2) 1990, pp. 77-98. Available at <<http://www.erudit.org/apropos/utilisation.html>> [Accessed 12.01.2012].
- Lefebvre, Henri, 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated from French by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lomba, Ania, 1998. Colonialism-postcolonialism. London/New York: Routledge.

- Massumi, Brian, 2004. Translator's Foreword. In: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 2004 [1980]. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, pp. i-xxi.
- Middleton, Peter, 2010 [1999]. Poetry's Oral Stage. In *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*. Kemal, Salim and Gaskell, Ivan, eds., 2010 [1999], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Milonga, La. [online] Available at <<http://www.lamilonga.fr/>> [Accessed 02.09.2011].
- Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-development of France. [Online]. Available at <http://www.immigration.gouv.fr/spip.php?page=dossiers_det_org&numrubrique=311&numarticle=1331> [Accessed 11.10.2011] when I rechecked 18.01.2012, I discovered that the Ministry is dissolved and turned into a Secretariat for Immigration, Integration, Asylum and Development in solidarity, accessed 18.01.2012).
- Mitchell, Jon P., 2010. Introduction. In Marit Melhuus, Jon P. Mitchell and Helena Wulff, eds. 2009. *Ethnographic Practice in the Present*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 1-15.
- Mol, Annemarie and Law, John, 1994. Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology. *Social Studies of Science* [e-journal] Vol. 24. (Nov., 1994), pp. 641-671. Available through JSTOR. [Accessed 27.05.2011].
- Monument de la Place de la Nation [online]. Available at <<http://www.insecula.com/salle/MS01600.html>> [Accessed 19.08.2011].
- Monument de la place de la République. [online]. Available at <<http://www.insecula.com/salle/MS01355.html>> [Accessed 19.08.2011].
- Nada. 2002. SlamStory: Un aperçu du Slam en France par NADA [online] Available at <http://www.webzinemaker.com/admi/m6/page.php3?num_web=1553&rubr=3&id=49274> [Accessed 28.04.2011, when I rechecked 21.09.2011, the article was no longer available, either on this site or elsewhere on the Internet].
- Negri, Antonio, Petcou, Constantin, Petrescu, Doina and Querrien, Anne, 2008. What makes a biopolitical space? A discussion with Toni Negri. [online]. Translated from French by Bernard Schütze and Nicole Klein. Available through *Eurozine* at

- < <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html>> [Accessed 02.05.2008].
- Noiriel, Gérard, 1988. *Le Creuset Français: Histoire de l'Immigration XIX-XX Siècles*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Nuit Noire 17 octobre 1961*, 2005. [Film] Directed by Alain Tasma. France: Canal+
- Parmentier, Alexis, 2010. Banlieues. In Benbassa, Esther ed. *Dictionnaire des Racismes, de l'exclusion et des discriminations*. 2010, Paris: Larousse, p. 173.
- Pelto, Pertti J. and Pelto, Gretel H., 1978. *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinçon, Michel and Pinçon-Charlot, Monique, 2004. *Sociologie de Paris*. Paris. La Découverte.
- Pink, Sarah 2009: *Doing Sensory Anthropology*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Porcello, Thomas, Meintjes, Louise, Ochoa, Ana Maria and Samuels, David W., 2010. The Reorganization of the Sensory World. In *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 39, pp. 51-66.
- Rabinow, Paul. 1989. *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Renan, Ernest, 1990 [1882]. What is a Nation? In *Nation and Narration*. Bhabha, Homi K., ed. 1990. London: Routledge, pp. 1-8.
- Sabine, George H., 1952. The Two Democratic Traditions. In *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 61 (4), pp. 451-474.
- Sarkozy, Nicholas, 2007. Le discours de Nicolas Sarkozy. [online] 06.05.2011 Available through *Liberation* at <<http://www.liberation.fr/politiques/010118844-le-discours-de-nicolas-sarkozy>> [Accessed 17.08.2011].
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 1962 [1939]. *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*. Translated from French by Philip Mairet. London: Methuen.
- Scarface, 1983. [Film]. Directed by Brian de Palma. United States of America: Universal Pictures.
- Scarface Nation 2008. Review by S. James Synder 19.11.2008. [online] Available through *Time Entertainment* at

- <<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1859898,00.html>> [Accessed 23.05.2011].
- Schor, Naomi, 2006. Universalism. In: Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed. 2006. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*. New York: Colombia University Press, pp. 344-348.
- Schutz, Alfred, 1944. The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology. In: *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 49(6), pp. 499-507.
- Seremanakis, C. Nadia, 1991. The Ethics of Antiphony. In *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simon, Patrick, 2000, The Mosaic Pattern: Cohabitation between Ethnic Groups in Belleville, Paris. In *Minorities in European Cities. The Dynamics of Social Integration and Social Exclusion at the Neighbourhood Level*, Sophie Body-Gendrot and Marco Martiniello, eds., London: Macmillan Press, p.100-115.
- Slam*, 1998. [Film]. Directed by Marc Levin. United States of America: Off Line Entertainment Group.
- Slam: du bistrot a la télé* 2006. [Online video]. France 3. Available at <<http://int13.net/france/index.php/2006/11/25/111-dgiz-france-3-ce-soir-ou-jamais-13-11-2006>> [Accessed 18.01.2012].
- Smith, Marc, 2003. About slam poetry. In *The Spoken Word Revolution (Slam, hip hop 6 the poetry of a new generation)* by Mark Eleved ed., Marc Smith advised, Naperville: Sourcebooks mediaFusion an imprint of Sourcebooks Inc., pp. 116-120.
- Somers-Willett, Susan B. A., 2009. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Souleymane Diamanak: Le meilleur ami des mots (1/2) 29.12.2009 [podcast] [On air 16.06.2007]. Available at <<http://archives.gip-epra.fr/emission/souleymane-diamanka-le-meilleur-ami-des-mots-1-2-s3003b-8>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].
- Souleymane Diamanka, Fiches auteurs. 19.04.2007. [Online]. Available at <<http://www.etonnants-voyageurs.com/spip.php?article1770>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].

- Souleymane Diamanka, Interview de: Poète peul amoureux. 22.10.2007. [Online]. Available at <<http://www.evene.fr/musique/actualite/interview-souleymane-diamanka-hiver-peul-1013.php>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].
- Souleymane Diamanka, l'orfèvre des mots de la Star Academy. 29.11.2007. [Online]. Available at <<http://www.afrik.com/article13005.html>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].
- Souleymane Diamanka: En sol majeur. 28.03.2010. [Podkast]. Available at RFI <<http://www.rfi.fr/contenu/20100324-1-souleymane-diamanka>> [Accessed 01.11.2011].
- Souleymane Diamanka: Le meilleur ami des mots. 06.03.2007. [Online]. Available at <<http://www.contrepoint.info/?p=269>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].
- Souleymane Diamanka: Le slam au goût Peul. 27.01.2008. [Online] Available at <<http://www.afrik.com/article13423.html>> [Accessed 25.12.2011].
- Steiner, Anne, 2010 *Belleville Cafés*. Éditions l'échappée.
- Stewart, Alex, 1998. *The Ethnographer's Method*. Lodon: Sage.
- Stora, Benjamin, 2005. Quand une mémoire (de guerre) peut en cacher une autre (coloniale). In: Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., 2005: *La Fracture Coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte. pp. 57-65.
- Taylor, Charles, 1985. The Person. In *The Category of the Person*. In: Carrithers, Michael, Collins, Steven and Lukes, Steven eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 257-281.
- Thomas, Nicholas, 1996. History and Anthropology. In: *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, 1996, Barnard, Alan and Spencer, Jonathan, eds., London: Routledge, pp. 272-276.
- Tilley, Chris, 1994. Space, place, landscape and perception. Phenomenological Perspectives. In *A phenomenology of landscape*. Oxford: Berg.
- Tilley, Christopher, 1994. Space, place, landscape and perception. Phenomenological Perspectives. In: Christopher Tilley, *A phenomenology of landscape*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 7-34.
- Turner, Victor, 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

- Turner, Victor, 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Wieviorka, Michel, 2006. Immigration and the nation. In: Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed. 2006. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*. New York: Colombia University Press, pp. 262-265.
- Wolcott, Harry F., 2005. *The Art of Fieldwork*. Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press.
- Wolf, Eric 1994 [1990]: Facing Power: Old Insights, New Questions. In *Assessing Cultural Anthropology* by Borofsky, R., ed., New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wolf, Eric 1997 [1982]: *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wulff, Helena, 1988. *Twenty Girls: Growing Up, Ethnicity and Excitement in a South London Microculture*. Stockholm: Stockholm studies in Social Anthropology, 21.

Other websites: Concepts and French-English translations:

French-English Larousse available <<http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french-english>>

Animateur [Accessed 19.05.2011].

Animer [Accessed 19.05.2011].

Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales

Décloisonner at <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/décloisonner>> [Accessed 31.05.2011].

Personnage at <www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/personnage> [Accessed 20.09.2011].

English Wikipedia available at < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>

Beatboxing [Accessed 5.06.2011].

Eddy (fluid dynamics) [Accessed 17.01.2012].

Degrowth [Accessed 19.09.2011].

Haecceity [Accessed 11.08.2011].

Milonga [Accessed 20.09.2011].

Mycelium [Accessed 4.09.2011].

Scarface [Accessed 23.05.2011].

Subaltern (postcolonialism) [Accessed 24.08.2011].

French Wikipedia available at <<http://fr.wikipedia.org/>>

Brigade Anti-Criminalité [Accessed 2.09.2011].

Boulevard [Accessed 19.08.2011].

Boulevards_parisiens [Accessed 19.08.2011].

Clinamen [Accessed 23.08.2011].

Coluche [Accessed 19.09.2011].

CRS [Accessed 20.11.2007].

Décroissance [Accessed 19.09.2011].

Eccéité [Accessed 11.08.2011].

Gegene [Accessed 17.11.2011].

Mur_des_Fermiers [Accessed 19.08.2011].

Place de la République [Accessed 18.10.2011].

English Wiktionary available at <<http://en.wiktionary.org/>>

Anima [Accessed 19.05.2011].

Αἴσθησις [Accessed 15.04.2011].

French Wiktionary available at <<http://fr.wiktionary.org/>>

Animer [Accessed 19.05.2011].

Personnage [20.09.2011].

Wordreference French-English language Forum

Mot passe-partout at <<http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=69283>>
[Accessed 22.09.2011].

Finistère at <<http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1406523>>
[Accessed 23.10.2011].

Personnage at <http://www.wordreference.com/fren/personnage> [Accessed 20.09.2011]

Première nécessité at <[http://www.wordreference.com/fren/premiere necessite](http://www.wordreference.com/fren/premiere%20necessite)>
[Accessed 20.09.2011].

Other sources:

Anaphora, Poetic Technique. [Online] Available through *Poets.org The Academy of American Poets* at <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5770>> [Accessed 21.12.2011].

Bonnes gos [online] Available through *LEO dictionary and language forum* at <<http://dict.leo.org/forum/viewUnsolvedquery.php?idThread=635773>> [Accessed 23.10.2011].

Pchit, toi aussi kaou ka fê la ma fille ! at <<http://www.e-voyageur.com/forum/voyage-8666.php>> [Accessed 23.10.2010].

Theorem at <<http://machaut.uchicago.edu>> [Accessed 11.08.2011].